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THE BOY STOOD ERECT, WHILE FROM HIS LIPS CAME A FLOOD OF MELODY. THAT SEEMED TO THE ASTONISHED CROWD MORE LIKE SOME WONDERFUL INSTRUMENT.

OR, The Queer Combination.

BY JO PIERCE,
AUTHOR OF "TARTAR TIM," "BOB O' THE
BOWERY," "FIVE POINTS PHIL," "JACK-
O'-LANTERN," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

NOT SO INNOCENT AS THEY LOOKED.

"FIFTY thousand dollars at stake!"

"It's a big pile!"

"Too big for a gang of rascals to secure."

"Set me an' my pards loose an' the gang won't get it. Fifty thousand dollars! Aba! that will be a good hoodle ter work for, an' The Three Innocents will be on their muscle. Let 'em loose—man, boy an' bear. The good old de-

tective firm will be in clover, an' we'll astonish even the country folks with our show of inner-cence!"

The speakers were two men who were seated in a small house on Baxter street, in the city of New York. One of the two was a well-dressed, keen-faced man of middle age who, somehow, had a very official look about him; but the other was a little old man with shaggy hair and beard, both of which seemed to be calling loudly, but in vain, for the services of a barber, while his clothing was coarse and poor, and none too clean. He had a run-down, vagabondish look, and seemed to be but a grade above the level of a tramp, but his face was shrewd and intelligent.

This man rejoiced in the romantic name of Eliab Godown. Whether or not he was a vagabond will appear later.

His companion, the well-dressed man, was a detective with whose name all New York was familiar. Eliab had a habit of calling him "Mr. Gotham," which name told no tales out of school, and could be spoken safely at all times, and by that name he shall be known in these pages.

Mr. Godown, seedy and dirty though he was, seemed to be a jolly sort of a fellow, and when he spoke of astonishing the country folks, he broke into a series of chuckles and appeared to be in high spirits.

"The principal thing is to recover the stolen money, and not the stealers," added Gotham.

"Pack, your Honor—true as you live."

"We have to deal with no ordinary men, and should be entirely off the track were it not for the clew I have received from the old pick-pocket. He knows that the money is to be taken to Birdseye for concealment."

"Exactly."

"It has been stolen from the bank, but all the currency is spotted; the bank has the numbers of the notes, and the thieves dare not try to pass it. There is also a good deal of silver coin, but it is brand new, and to pass that would be dangerous, with us on the watch."

"Wish they'd try it on me."

"The old pick-pocket has 'peached,' he has told me, I think, all that he knows. He had his news from Tipton Tom, one of the robbers, who sailed for England a week ago. This is the tip I have: One of the robbers—I do not know any of them except the missing Tipton Tom—knows of a place at Birdseye where the treasure may be hidden in safety. It will be taken there, but how, and when, and by whom, I have no idea."

"Nor where it will be hid."

"No. The robbers may live there, or they may not; they may be very respectable, in the eyes of the world, or the very reverse; they may be rich or poor, old or young—in fact, we know nothing about them. We do not know how they will take their plunder to Birdseye, or how they will hide it. We have no clew whatever. You see you have quite a job ahead of you."

Eliab Godown chuckled cheerfully.

"The Three Innocents kin do 'em up."

"There may be danger."

"I hope so; an' so does Whistling Jacob an' Lightfoot Peter."

"I would give you much advice, but it seems superfluous to coach an old-timer like you."

"Gotham, how many years hev I worked for you?"

"Ten."

"Yes; an' I've been in biz over twenty. Me an' my boy, an' my bear, is knowed all over half a dozen States. We was trampin' there when men o' to-day was kids. I'm a tough old trumper, Gotham, an' I've had many a boy an' many a bear, first an' last. The bears hev growed old an' died; the boys hev growed old an' gone inter other biz. Somehow, when they git growed ter be men, they think goin' round with old Eliab Godown an' his bear ain't the biz they like. They desert me. Two o' my 'prentices are detectives in your employ, an' doin' well. Ain't they?"

"Very well, indeed, Eliab."

The old man rubbed his hands.

"Prentices o' mine; 'prentices o' mine! Got their fust lessons at thief-ketchin' goin' 'round with old Godown an' his dancin' bear!"

"You're a queer fellow, Eliab."

"Runs in the fam'ly. I couldn't be happy ef I wa'n't queer. My father, Ararat Godown, was eccentric; so was my granddad, Pisgah Godown; an' so was Shem Godown, Japheth Godown—but you don't keer for my genealogy, especially as none o' my ancestors went 'round with a boy an' a dancin' bear as a detective combination."

"If they were your equals, they were good

men, for The Three Innocents can't be surpassed. Well, will you go to Birdseye on this case?"

"Will I? I shall be tickled ter death."

"It is settled, then."

It was a sleepy old town, though by no means a small one. Two thousand persons lived within its limits, and the country place of that size never bows its head low in humble reverence to any one, or any place. But Birdseye seemed to have outlived its youth, and settled down into decorous old age.

Its houses were old-fashioned in style, rusty of appearance, and very substantial. The same description would apply to most of its people. Sober, dignified and honest, as a rule, they were without the follies of the generation in which they lived. This, we have said, was the rule—Birdseye had some dishonest citizens, some who were fashionable, and some who were gay and giddy, but they were in the minority.

Sensations rarely disturbed the placid life of Birdseye people, though they were human enough to look, listen and gossip when they had a chance, just like ordinary folks. In fact, when it came to gossip, Birdseye was on deck every time, ready and eager to tell the news, and bound to see that, like a huge snow-ball rolling down hill, the facts lost nothing in course of progress.

It was noon, and the main street of the town—it was main by nature and Main by name—was better filled than it would be a little later, when the "hour's nooning" was past for the workers, and the children had gone to school.

Suddenly, new and strange characters appeared upon the scene. Around the corner by 'Si French's store came a procession made up of a man, a boy and a bear. Men and boys were common enough at Birdseye, but bears were not, and there was great excitement right away, especially among the young Birdseye citizens.

The bear was brown, big and stately. He walked a good deal as though he were a President-elect of the United States on his way to be sworn into office, and well aware that the eyes of the world were upon him. Alas for the bear, however—despite his ponderous dignity, he was a captive in chains. A collar was around his neck, and to this was attached a small, steel chain, and at the further end of the chain was the man previously mentioned.

He was a curious little old man, homely, awkward, ill-dressed and not any too clean; and he walked with a loose motion which naturally awakened a fear that his joints might fall apart and leave him lying in pieces.

The boy was not like the man. He was fifteen years old, rather small, but compactly and stoutly built, and though his clothes were coarse, they were as clean as they were plain. He had a bright, well-formed, intelligent and attractive face, and would not have been classed as anything less than a keen young fellow who ought to make his way in the world.

When this trio came around the corner, some of the older loungers on the steps of the store realized that a trained bear was among them, and there were prompt calls to the man.

"Hello! there, mister!"

"Where did you get it?"

"Show up your bear!"

"What can he do?"

"Let us see him do it!"

Not by even a glance did the little old man show that he heard these calls, but with a turn as slow and ponderous as though he had an ox-team in hand, he brought the bear around facing the loungers; and then, removing his battered old hat, showed the merriest of dirty faces and nodded several times in rapid succession.

"Gentlemen all, an' maidens fair!" he cried, in a shrill, cracked voice, "let me interduce ter your notice the great, unrivaled, incomprehensible aggregation o' mastodonic merit, The Three Innocents! Hyar we be, in all our loveliness an' pristine brilliancy. This 'ere is the world-renowned brown bear, Lightfoot Peter, captered in the Rocky Mountains, in 1840; sent by Express as a present ter Cleopatra, Queen o' the Persians, an' by her given ter Alexander, the Great, King o' the Ostrogoths an' Caledonians. Lightfoot Peter, make yer best obeisance!"

A motion of a light stick which the speaker carried in one hand caused the bear to sit up, and then he bowed gravely.

"Next," continued the little old man, "we hev the great orivaled musical prodigy, Whistling Jacob, the boy wonder o' two continents, who was born with a genius which amounts ter the mirac'lous. As an infant he could no more keep from whistlin' than he could

eat boardin'-house steak; an' the epidemic growed on him ontill he seen he had got ter go out an' take the 'bull world ter work it off in. He tried it fust on a dog, an' as it didn't hurt him, he went ter Europe an' whistled ter all the crowned heads. When he whistled, they come! At the Pyramids o' Egypt he met this hyar bear, an' the two struck up a partnership. Whistling Jacob, make yer best obeisance!"

The boy removed his cap and obeyed.

"As fur me," went on the loquacious old fellow, "I am the chap that had charge o' the Numidian lions when Rome made the gladiators fight inter them, an' so tickled Napoleon Bonaparte when he visited Caesar. My name was Vagarius then, but I keep pace with the times; I am Eliab Godown, now. Eliab, make yer best obeisance!"

The little old man spread his feet far apart, plucked off his hat and bowed so very low that he almost crawled through between his own legs.

He came up safely, however, his face as dirty and merry as ever.

"Now, gentlemen," he resumed, "you know us an' we know you, an' you shall see what we can do. I spoke in poetry then, but I wa'n't ter blame, no more nor the gal who fell in love an' changed her name. Sech things will break out, an' all the 'intment in the world can't stop the eruption!"

CHAPTER II.

MARKING THEIR MEN.

By this time Eliab Godown had a good audience, old persons and young alike crowding around to look and listen. To most of them, accustomed as they were to rural scenes, such a rapid flow of language was strange, and one man ventured the opinion that the little old man was crazy.

This idea was not general; the prevailing opinion was that he was a good-natured, but very alert vagabond, and that he had business always in mind—the business of giving a "show" for what money he could get from them.

Eliab wheeled toward the boy.

"Jacob, pucker!"

Jacob was seen to contract his lips.

Eliab wheeled upon the bear.

"Peter, prepare!"

Peter "prepared" by rearing upon his haunches.

"Selah!"

It was to be doubted if Mr. Godown had any idea what his last-uttered word meant, but it had a meaning for the other two "Innocents," and the effect promptly followed the cause. Instantly the boy began to whistle, and the bear began to dance, and Eliab began to stamp one foot upon the ground and, at the same time, clap his hands in time, though not loud enough to drown the sounds. The "show" was fairly begun.

At first all attention was on the bear, for nothing could have furnished a greater novelty at Birdseye. But, Lightfoot Peter sadly belied his *sobriquet*; he was not light of foot. On the contrary, he was more clumsy than the average bear, and he shuffled around in a ludicrous fashion, but he was a fascinating exponent of the art. If other dancing bears were comically dignified, Peter simply put them wholly in the shade. His ponderous dignity covered him as with a garment, and he was as solemn as though taking part in his own wake. But, to use a painfully slangy term, he "got there just the same," and one old gentleman who had led the village church-choir thirty-seven years and two months, affirmed that Peter kept perfect time and astounded him.

But Peter's star was destined to grow dim.

Another star was on exhibition.

After a little while all except the children became aware that they were being treated to remarkable music. *Whistling* is a common gift, and the boy who can't do something at it is a rare specimen; but nobody in Birdseye had ever heard whistling like that of the dark-faced boy who gave Peter his ruling impulse.

The boy stood erect, turning his dark, flashing eyes, now and then, as though for effect, and from his lips came a flood of melody that seemed to the astonished crowd more like some wonderful instrument, eclipsing all other instruments they had ever heard. There were tricks and devices in the execution which dumfounded them, but at all times the notes were rich, pure and silvery to an amazing degree.

Birdseye was amazed, and from that moment the boy with the flashing black eyes became the hero of all.

And so it went on, with Jacob whistling,

Peter dancing, and Eliab stamping his foot and clapping his hands as though his whole heart was in the work.

Suddenly the show ended for the time. Jacob stopped whistling, the bear ceased dancing, and the little old man straightened up like a soldier.

"Act first!" he shrilly announced, his face all aglow with good humor and zeal. "Behold what this 'ere glorious country can exhibit, an' then admit that life ain't lived in vain. Gents, ef you had died in infancy, you'd never see'd that unrivaled bear dance until he follered you ter the spirit-land. And, gents, you wouldn't heerd no sech whistlin', nuther."

"Where'd you come from?" asked one of the loungers, recovering his breath.

"All over the country."

"Forgot to wash on the way, didn't you?"

"Stopped it as soon as I thought o' comin' here, fur I didn't want ter be out o' style."

"But the boy is washed clean."

"He has ter be, fer the whistle ter get out on him."

"Where did he learn the art?"

"It was borned inter him."

"Give us another tune, boy!"

"Give the bear a show," requested Eliab Godown. "He ain't got a fan with him, an' his shaggy coat is warm for this weather. I've knowed him ter sweat so that I had ter scoop the water away with a bucket ter keep him from bein' drowned, an' the waves run waist-high at that!"

With this veracious statement Eliab launched forth another speech, his shrill voice piping out in a most comical way. Whatever he said or did was productive of laughter, for it was colored with an individuality which cannot be described, and while it put the seniors in great good humor, it fairly "caught the town," as far as the children were concerned. They stared in open-mouthed wonder, first at the funny old man, and then at the funny bear.

Eliab knew his business, and, as soon as he thought best, Jacob was told to whistle again. The show was renewed, and, while the boy with the flashing black eyes thrilled them all with marvelous music, Lightfoot Peter swung around in slow and dignified circles.

When this performance was over, Eliab showed the crowd that he was not there without an object. He pulled off his battered old hat, and began to make the rounds in search of coins which, he thought, ought to change owners. There was not a superfluity of cash in Birdseye, nor were the people particularly generous, but they knew a good thing when they saw it, and quite a harvest rewarded Mr. Godown's efforts. Pennies and nickels rattled into his hat.

He had no sooner come to a halt than a dapper little man stepped out of the crowd.

"I presume, stranger," he observed, "that your bear can do tricks."

"A few—just a few. His specialty is dancing."

"Mr. Piercey don't approve of dancing," observed a voice in the crowd. "He's an exparson!"

The man who had mentioned "tricks" turned quickly.

"Do not be unjust, sir," he blandly replied. "This is quite a different matter from that we have been discussing. For the sake of the dear children, I am happy to have this intelligent animal perform, be it in the line of dancing, or otherwise. Amusement for our little folks is both rational and good."

And he smiled sweetly upon the staring youngsters.

He was well-known there. He was the Reverend Clarence Piercey, a clergyman whose health, it was said, had compelled him to abandon for the time the trying labors of his calling. He did not look strong. He was not over five feet and five inches in stature, and was a light weight. He was, however, a very amiable man, and his smile was open and bland, if not particularly intelligent. Moreover, it was very "gushing."

Scarcely had he finished speaking when a man stepped to his side whose appearance presented a marked contrast. This man was nearly six feet tall and had a form of muscular proportions, but that was all that could be said for him. He looked more like a New York "blood" of doubtful character than anything else. He sported a tall white hat; a flaming red neck-tie; a big watch-chain with a huge pendant guard; an alleged diamond pin, and light-colored, checked trousers.

A very flashy fellow he was, and if he had been in the city of Gotham, the police would have kept a watchful eye on him.

"I second the motion," he said, with the easy assurance of a man of the world. "I will give any boy here half a dollar to climb yonder tree and deposit a scarf there; and I'll give the bear one dollar to bring it down. Let the children see how a bear can climb. Eh, parson?"

The Reverend Mr. Piercey looked with grave disapproval at the flashy man.

"It would be amusing," he agreed; and then edged a few paces away from the generous sport.

If the latter saw this act he did not heed it. Several boys were at hand to win the half-dollar, and when Eliab Godown had consented to the arrangement, the sport selected one and the lad went hurrying up the tree. It was a hard climb for him, but he accomplished his work at last, and then the brown bear had his turn. The way in which he did the job made him more of a hero than ever. What Peter did not know about tree-climbing was superfluous, and he went up with ease.

While nearly every one was staring at him, Eliab edged around where he could speak with Whistling Jacob.

"Say, be you on ter his nibs in the white hat?" Eliab asked.

"Yes," the boy tersely replied.

"What is he?"

"A sport."

"How bad?"

"He has a rakish cut of jib."

"Whar'd he git the money ter buy them togs?—make it, or steal it?"

"Do you suspect him?"

"I never suspect till I know, but he's wu'th watchin'."

"His name is George Messenger; I heard him so called."

"Know any more 'bout him?"

"No."

"Sarculate an' question. Pretend you think he's a stunnin' looker, an' learn his biz, an' w'ot he is. Be sly, though; be as cunnin' as a serpent!"

"I'm on!"

This conversation had been carried on in a way which could not attract attention. Eliab and his partner knew their business. Not once had they looked at the object of their suspicions while referring to him, and nobody was the wiser for the colloquy. When it was over they separated, and Eliab was ready to receive Lightfoot Peter when he came down.

"The bear takes the dollar!" he shrilly announced.

"And here is the coin," Messenger answered, promptly, as he passed it over. "Your bear is a good one. What more can he do?"

Eliab had carefully trained his pet to perform a series of tricks, and these were now shown to the crowd. Peter seemed also to know whatever was said to him, let the words be ever so new and vague, and he added a good deal to his reputation.

His master intended to pass the hat around again, but was prevented by an unlooked-for occurrence.

Around the corner of the store came a wild-eyed, hatless man, but nobody paid attention to him until his loud shouts attracted the attention of all.

"Where's Sowders?" he yelled. "I want Nate Sowders!"

That person happened to be at hand, and he stepped forth from the crowd.

"Hallo, Sherwin!" he replied; "what's up?"

"I want one of your boats, right away!" was the excited answer. "Somebody has stole my boat, and gone out to steal fish. I'll have the law on him; I'll break his head. The sacred majesty of the law must be preserved. I think it is that dandy from New York, and he's stole my boat!"

"Shocking!" cried the Reverend Mr. Piercey, uplifting both hands.

"Why don't you start?" demanded Sherwin, almost dancing with anger and excitement. "I want your boat to ketch that thief, and when I get him, I'll send him to jail for life!"

CHAPTER III.

THEY GO ON THE WAR-PATH.

It was evident that Sherwin did not possess the good will of the citizens in any great degree, for nearly all of them smiled and began to make jokes at his expense, but Clarence Piercey set a good example.

"Outlawry must not flourish in our good town!" he declared; "and I, for one, am ready and anxious to help Jared Sherwin recover his own."

"Count me in!" cried Messenger, gayly.

"Come on, then, gents!" added Sowders,

"My boats are at your disposal, and we'll have some fun, if nothing more."

"I'll have the law of him!" again affirmed the angry man.

He could not say that no attention was paid him. Every one who was able to get away followed him and Sowders—even Eliab, Jacob and the bear fell in, and the procession started off.

Back of the village was a pond which covered one hundred acres of land. Once it had been only a fish-brook, but the necessity of controlling the supply of water for the mills situated on the stream had led to the building of a wall to stop the flow, and the result was a reservoir of some importance—Birdseye Pond it was called. Next, the State passed a law that no fish should be caught during the ensuing three years, and this term had not expired.

Boats were kept at the dam for use by pleasure parties, these being in charge of Sowders. Jared Sherwin owned land which bordered the lake, and he, too, kept a boat. It was, however, the worry of his life, and as he was not a favorite, it had been used without leave repeatedly, and until he was a very indignant man. He had no sympathy. Indeed, so unpopular was he, it had often been suggested, on the sly, that it would serve him right to smash his boat. The young fellows who said this, though, were kept from action by a potent cause. Homely and disagreeable as old Jared was, he had a pretty daughter, and not one of the "boys" of the place had the heart to deprive Direxa Sherwin of her favorite pastime of rowing out on the pond with her own fair hands.

Through the village to the pond went the crowd, and Eliab, hanging tightly to Lightfoot Peter, found another chance to address his boy ally.

"That Messenger ain't a crop nat'ral ter these parts," Eliab remarked.

"He's a city fellow, sure."

"Keep yer eye on him, lad!"

"You bet!" Jacob briefly replied.

"He's jest the kind o' a hairpin ter be in lawless biz, an' about the size the robbers would send up hyar ter find a place where their booty could be stowed away."

"He's a sport," Jacob acknowledged, in a noncommittal way—young as he was, he was more inclined to be cautious than was Mr. Godown.

"I wish one on us could go out in the boat!"

"Why?"

"He'd have an all-fired good chance ter size up his companions."

"I'll try it."

"Do it, my hearty!"

Eliab spoke with the peculiar, happy, joyful air common to him, but Lightfoot Peter was not inclined to move as rapidly as the crowd was going, so he and his master fell behind, and no further chance for conversation was afforded, since Jacob kept up with the others.

The shore of the pond was soon reached. It was not the most pleasant sheet of water in existence, its appearance being marred by an island in the center, of two acres in dimensions. This had originally been a knoll, with pine, spruce and hemlock trees upon it. Some of these were now submerged near their roots, and had died out. Thus, the island was one crowned with thick, green foliage, but surrounded with dead, ill-looking trees and floating logs.

As the alleged boat-thief was not visible, Mr. Sherwin inferred that he was near the island, unlawfully catching fish. As the penurious old farmer was getting nothing for the use of his boat, the fishing became a positive sin in his eyes.

Sowders had two boats, and there was such a call for them that both were unlocked. They were quickly filled, and away they went, with the oarsmen pulling briskly. It was not until they were well away from the shore that any one noticed the fact that Whistling Jacob was one of the passengers.

"Hullo! youngster, where are you going?" demanded Messenger, laughing.

"Out boating," was the boy's laconic reply.

"Is this in your line of business?"

"Yes."

"Then whistle for us, to pay your passage."

"No, no!" sharply ordered Sherwin. "Make no noise here, for we want to come upon the thief unawares. Boy, if you whistle, I'll throw you into the pond!"

"I shouldn't spill it," replied Jacob, in his peculiar, terse way.

"Let the boy alone," directed another man. "He is doing no harm, and shall not be misused."

"He should have brought the bear along,"

suggested Messenger, "and then, if our thief had climbed a tree, Lightfoot Peter could have brought him down."

No one heeded this remark. The villagers were inclined to guy old Sherwin concerning the situation, and they succeeded in making him more angry than ever.

Their remarks gave to Jacob the information that the man who was supposed to have stolen the boat was a young New Yorker who was in Birdseye on his vacation, and, furthermore, revealed the fact that the young man, who was named Ralph Littleton, had shown Direxa Sherwin some attention, and thereby made the old gentleman his enemy.

"Another man to size up," thought Jacob. "Littleton, like Messenger, is an outsider. Here are two men who deserve to be looked to before Eliab and I decide whom to suspect of connection with the bank-robbery."

The boats approached the island, and, at Sherwin's earnest request, the occupants relapsed into silence. Every one looked for the lone boatman, but he was not to be seen. If he were engaged in unlawful fishing, he was either close to the island, or on the opposite side.

A consultation took place, and it was agreed that the boats should separate, go around the island, and meet on the opposite side. This was done; slowly and carefully the men rowed, but no discovery was made.

"He's on the island!" declared Sherwin.

"Fishing on dry land?"

"Never you mind; you'll find it as I say," was the stubborn answer. "Put me ashore!"

His allies were not reluctant. They rowed in among the dead trees, which were often so close together that the oars had to be lifted as they passed, and thus reached the land. There a discovery awaited them—carelessly tied to a tree was a small boat, and nearly every one there recognized it as Sherwin's.

The old man's eyes glittered.

"I've got him!" he declared. "The scoundrel can't get away without a boat, and he can't have this one. Part of you stay here as a guard, and the rest of us will drop on Mister Littleton!"

He sprung ashore, and the others followed. Whistling Jacob began to be really interested. The island was a dark, thickly-wooded, gloomy place, and he could not see why any one should go out on a pleasure-trip and bring up in such a locality. His mind was just in condition to receive impressions, and he could not help thinking that there was something suspicious about the matter.

At all events, he was bound to go along and see whatever occurred.

Jared Sherwin had become wily, and he crept up the hillside with as little noise as possible. Half a dozen persons followed him, with Jacob among them. The nature of the way, with short pine brush in abundance, caused him to spread out somewhat, and thus it was the musical genius who made the first discovery.

He had parted a fringe of pines, and was about to creep up the bank beyond, but was brought to a halt by the sight of a man. Not twenty feet distant stood a tall, well-dressed young fellow, and his genteel appearance led Jacob to conclude, at once, that it was Ralph Littleton.

Plainly, the latter had thus far seen and heard nothing of his enemies.

He presented a striking figure as he stood there. In strong contrast to his good clothes he held a spade, one end of which rested upon the ground, with his left foot planted upon the blade, while in his hand he held a scrap of paper. Thus might a farmer be equipped, as far as the spade was concerned, when going out to dig up the soil.

But for what was this well-dressed young man going to dig?

Certainly, he was not there to cultivate the soil, and a suspicion at once flashed upon Jacob. Was it possible that the wealth stolen from the bank was to be buried there? No better place could be found, certainly, if they wished to put it out of sight entirely, and no one else was likely to go digging around the island.

Suddenly the young man put the paper back in his pocket and drove the spade far enough into the soft soil—it was where a tree had recently been uprooted—to make it stand erect. Next, he lifted a small rope from the ground and tied it to the handle of the spade.

Jacob looked in growing wonder. What kind of a performance did the man contemplate?

The boy was not destined to get more light on this point. There was a crashing of bushes at one side, and, as the man looked up, Jared

Sherwin broke from cover and confronted him. Jared was angry. He was very much disappointed not to have caught Littleton fishing, but this only added to his wrath, and he was resolved to make trouble about the boat.

"So you're here!" he snarled, savagely.

Littleton appeared to be startled and confused, but he made a strong effort to regain calmness.

"Yes, Mr. Sherwin," he replied, politely.

"Don't you 'mister' me! I won't have it!" and down came the old man's foot on the ground.

"Excuse me, sir; I meant no offense—"

"Didn't mean none when you stole my boat, I s'pose."

"Stole your boat?"

"That's what I said."

Whistling Jacob saw Littleton's face flush deeply.

"Pardon me, but I have not stolen it, sir."

"You've got it, ain't you?"

"Yes, sir; but—"

"Did you get my leave?"

"No."

"Then you stole it. Hang you, sir, I'll have the law of you—I will, by gracious!"

Jared shook his fist at the object of his anger, and looked as though he would like to dance with passion, while Ralph Littleton stood silent and embarrassed. Clearly, he had some reason for being confused, and looked like a man who was in a bad plight and did not know how to get out of it.

CHAPTER IV.

JARED DISCOVERS TOO MUCH.

ALL the members of the search-party were now at hand, and they stood in a group back of Sherwin, watching and listening, but showing no sympathy for Jared. Whistling Jacob, too, came out of the pine thicket, and was one of the most interested persons present.

The spade still stood where Ralph had thrust it into the soft soil, with the rope tied around it, and, to Jacob, the singular combination seemed to say, mutely: "I am a mystery; solve me if you can!"

Littleton rallied.

"I trust, Mr. Sherwin, that you are not really offended," he answered, pacifically. "I have not intentionally done anything to anger or injure you—"

"Why did you take my boat?"

Littleton hesitated.

"Wasn't it locked?"

"Yes."

"And you used a bogus key, unlocked it, made off with it, used it—in fine, stole it!"

"Mr. Sherwin, how much does it cost for the use of a boat here?" suddenly asked the young man.

"Sometimes more; sometimes less. You ought to know. How much did it cost you?"

"I will give you five dollars for the use of your boat, and return the craft within an hour."

"No, sir!"

"Ten dollars!"

Jared's eyes opened widely. It was a sum which touched him. With the good opinion which he had of money, that ten dollars would have unlocked his heart if anything could, but he was too angry to consider a compromise. As it was, the crafty, suspicious side of his nature was touched. Ten dollars was a good deal of money—a vast amount, in his opinion—and, he thought, nobody would offer it without some extraordinary motive.

"What's up?" he demanded, looking around. "Got some crime you want to hide? What've you been doing here, anyhow? Suspicious—very!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Ralph, hastily. "All I want is to avoid trouble. I am a comparative stranger in this town, and I wish to live on good terms with you all. I have not wronged any one intentionally, and am willing to pay for all I use. Come, Mr. Sherwin, let us go to the boat, and I'll then give you ten dollars, and only ask that I be set ashore by you."

As he spoke he moved on a few steps in a very inviting way, but this only made matters the worse.

"No, you don't!" declared Sherwin, his hair seeming to bristle with suspicion. "There's a mystery about this island, and I am going to solve it!"

"Nonsense!" cried Littleton.

"You deny it, eh?"

"Most certainly."

"Well, I'm going to find out. I haven't any too good opinion of you, my fine fellow, and if anybody lived near here, I should be scared for

their safety. What're you doing with that spade? Been burying somebody?"

"You can see for yourself that I have not turned a sod or moved a particle of earth."

"Humph! Something is wrong, and I know it. Boys, scatter and search the island!"

"What nonsense!" exclaimed Ralph, with perceptible annoyance and alarm. "Come! let's all go back to the village—"

"Not until we've learned your secret. Come on!"

By this time the old man had interested his followers. He had talked about mysteries until they had come to believe there was one, and though they had no love for Jared, they wanted to see the mystery, if there was one. They were ready to follow where he led.

He started off at once, and there was a general movement in the same direction. Jacob continued to watch Littleton, and he saw an expression of painful uncertainty on the young man's face. He did not stand idle, however; he started after Sherwin, and was the person who followed closest.

Only a few steps did the leader go, however, before he came to a stop. Right ahead of him was a hut. It was of the rudest kind, being made of brush, sticks and mud, but there it was, a structure five feet wide and twelve long. "Ho!" exclaimed Sherwin. "Here is discovery number one. A hut on the island, and a brand new one at that. Started a colony, have you? Perhaps you have a bride there, too!"

The last words were ironical, but the speaker had his answer sooner than he expected. A young lady appeared in the doorway, and Jared Sherwin's lower jaw fell as though suddenly moved by machinery. For a moment he was speechless, and his equally-astonished followers were equally mute.

The young lady was Jared's own daughter, Direxa Sherwin!

The father's face lost its blank expression only to grow pale with anger, but, before he had recovered the power of speech, the girl moved toward him. She appeared to be alarmed, but the fact was so evident that any effort to avoid a collision would be useless, that she did not attempt any. She came quickly out of the hut, and after her came a bony, middle-aged woman who, likewise, was at once recognized. She was Miss Lucy Sherwin, Jared's sister.

Direxa was a pretty girl, but, just then, her beauty was under a cloud of anxiety. Her gaze sought her father's face in a way which told how well she understood his temper.

He did not compel her to open the conversation.

"Girl, what are you doing here?" he asked, in a shaking voice.

"I rowed out to see the island," she replied, and her voice was far from steady.

"Who with?"

"Aunt Lucy and"—here the girl flashed a quick look to Ralph—"Mr. Littleton."

"How dared you?" almost shouted Jared.

"Sir! What harm have I done?"

Sherwin's hair appeared to bristle more than ever.

"Didn't I tell you not to even *speak* with that dandy?"

He pointed contemptuously to Ralph.

"Excuse me," returned Direxa, her face flushing, "but I think that if we are going to discuss private affairs, we had better do it in private."

"We'll do it now, and here!" violently proclaimed Sherwin. "Everybody knows I have told that young scamp that you are too good for him, and that I won't have him around, and I will show my neighbors how to manage a contumacious daughter!"

Miss Lucy Sherwin, who was a severe-faced maiden lady, advanced and spoke in a voice as severe as her expression.

"Jared Nicholas Sherwin, if I was you, I would learn to manage *myself*, first of all!" she proclaimed. "Such intemperate language, and public display, is odious to good taste—"

"So are you!" snapped her amiable brother.

"Lucy Cyrena, you mind your own business! I'm going to have a settlement *here*!"

"What have you to do with it, if Direxa and I did come here?"

"I forbade her going with that city dandy."

"Ain't she of age?"

"She's my daughter, and I choose her company."

"From the way you're trying to disgrace her, I should say the worst company she could have was *you*!"

"Lucy Cyrena, you mind your own business."

"Same to you, Jared Nicholas!"

Brother and sister glared at each other to the great amusement of the most of the spectators, who knew their vinegarish temper of old, but Direxa, who was a modest, amiable and sensible young lady, looked deeply mortified and pained.

"Aunt Lucy, do not say any more!" she requested. "We will return to the house at once."

She did turn away, but Jared was as obstinate as a mule, and was not to be appeased.

"You can't browbeat me!" he declared. "It's a duty I owe my neighbors to vindicate my reputation, and I'll do it. I want to know the meaning of all this. Why is this hut built here? Why was it built? Who built it? And, most of all, why does a daughter of mine visit it?"

Fiercely the old man glared, but George Messenger spoke in a tone of contempt:

"If I were you, I would look the but over, instead of standing here and howling like a sore-headed cur."

Sherwin overlooked the uncomplimentary part of the remark in view of the importance of the suggestion.

"I'll do it," he replied, and at once made a break for the hut.

Whistling Jacob had intended to keep silent, but his active mind could not overlook one fact. He was disgusted with Sherwin, and in sympathy with Direxa, and he felt pity for her when she was so publicly abused by her own father.

The boy moved quickly to where Ralph Littleton stood with folded arms and a frown on his handsome face.

"Mister, don't you see there is a chance for you to go?" Jacob inquired.

Littleton started, and then looked toward Direxa.

"Take her along," the youth suggested. "If she come with you, don't desert her now. The old gent can't be any madder, anyhow, and you can score a big point by beating him out, and taking her back as you came."

Ralph allowed his hand to rest upon Jacob's arm for a moment.

"My lad, I'll see you again!" he said.

Then he hurried to Direxa's side. Jacob watched. Direxa seemed to hesitate, but Lucy Cyrena added her voice, and, at the end of a few moments, the trio hastened away. Jacob chuckled. He knew that the sour, peevish old man would be full of wrath when he learned the latest news, and he would be well served. He would not have a chance to abuse his pretty daughter further in public.

Disappointment met Jared at the hut. With the exception of a log, the only seat there, and a few trifles which indicated nothing whatever, the hut was vacant. Whatever the secret was, the hut was a good custodian; it told no tales whatever. When convinced of this fact, Sherwin went outside again.

"Where is Littleton?" he asked.

The men looked around.

"He was here a moment ago," one villager replied.

"Where is Direxa?"

"She was here, too."

"They ain't here now. Where are they? Where've they gone?"

Nobody except Jacob knew, but the fact that Direxa, her aunt and Littleton were alike missing was very suggestive. So thought Sherwin, and he suddenly rushed toward that part of the island where the boats had been left. He was in a new fury, and he rushed through the thickets and over logs to the great detriment of his outer garments.

"The old man is laid out!" declared George Messenger.

"I hope so," replied a red-faced man.

"So do I. What business has he to interfere with the affairs of a man like Littleton? This island is now the property of no man, and is not worth a dollar. Suppose we tell Sherwin to keep away or we will duck him?"

"To keep away? What has that to do with his anger against Littleton and Direxa?"

"He ought not be allowed on this island."

"Why not?"

Whistling Jacob waited for the reply even more eagerly than the red-faced man. Why was Messenger so anxious about the island?

CHAPTER V.

THE INNOCENTS WANT TO KNOW.

"SHERWIN don't own this land, does he?" Messenger asked.

"No."

"Then he has no right to come here and annoy others."

This reason did not satisfy Whistling Jacob,

but doubts of Messenger were for the time put aside. Jared Sherwin had come to a halt, and was swinging his arms and shouting words which would do no credit to a good citizen. He had reached a little point of land where the island was the highest, and, too, about the only point where one could get a view of the lower part of the pond from the knoll.

Such a view he had gained, and what he saw enraged him more than ever.

His own boat was making away, with Ralph at the oars, and with Direxa and Miss Lucy as passengers.

If Jared had been a sensible man he would have admitted defeat and allowed the matter to rest there. He did not live in the Dark Ages, when a man could lord it as far as his power would permit, and as Direxa was legally her own mistress, his authority did not go far. He was, however, a sensitive man, and the fact that his neighbors saw him so signally discomfited aroused all his anger.

Such being the case, he stood on the elevation and stormed like a pirate until Messenger stepped up and pulled at his sleeve.

"See here, you make me tired!" declared the man in the flashy clothes.

"Hey?"

"Tired!"

Messenger repeated the word laconically, and in a tone of disgust. Then he abruptly added:

"You ought to have a strait-jacket."

Naturally, this did not improve Sherwin's temper, and he came near making an assault upon the speaker, but the fact that all the other men were smiling at his expense changed the old man's mood. He became angry at them all, and at once relapsed into sullen silence.

In this mood he descended the hill, and his companions followed. All entered the boats, and the return to the village was begun. Jacob was the quietest person present, but there was no one who felt like guying Jared. Despite the fact that he was a law-abiding citizen, he was quick-tempered, and if too much stirred up, might do some reckless deed for which he, as well as others, would subsequently be sorry.

When the eastern shore was reached, it was seen that his boat was in its proper place.

Littleton had made a quick passage and left it where he had found it.

Jared was the first man ashore from the last boats, and without a word to his allies, he marched off home in what Messenger aptly termed "double-quick time." It had been expected that he would carry out his threat of having Ralph arrested, as far as possible, but due thought had convinced the old gentleman that he was powerless.

Littleton had no right to take the boat himself, but with Direxa and Miss Lucy along, he had an undoubted right to its use.

A short distance from the landing-place lay Eliab Godown and Lightfoot Peter, and as the others strolled away, Jacob sought the side of his old friend.

"On?"

It was a very brief question, with Eliab as the speaker, but Jacob understood.

"Well, I haven't found the bank-thieves," the lad replied.

"You've had a chance ter size up Sherwin, Littleton and Messenger?"

"Yes."

"Sherwin is a violent-tempered, selfish old fellow; Littleton looks honest enough; Messenger is a sport from head-waters."

"Do you suspect anybody?"

"No, but there's a story for you to hear."

Jacob told what had occurred at the island. Eliab listened attentively, thoughtfully stroking Lightfoot Peter's head.

"A but on the island!" the leader then repeated. "You an' me don't know whether that is suspicious or not, but it seemed so ter strike them who ought ter know. Then Ralph Littleton was about ter dig up the ground. Why? What fur? Odd!"

Eliab tapped his long nose meditatively with his long finger.

"Odd!" he repeated.

"What about the rope he had just tied to the spade-handle?" asked Jacob.

"Give it up. Ropes an' spades don't usually go together. Jacob Petts, we'll go an' see the place ter night!"

"I couldn't help thinking what a nice spot it would be to bury the treasure stolen from the bank, if the robbers could get it here, and saw fit to bury it at all."

"Fack, Petts—fack! But they won't now bury it right there, now they know suspicion is on its legs—that is, ef Littleton is in the game."

"I doubt if he is."

"But there is a myst'ry 'bout the island?"

"There is, indeed."

"Can't be no buried treasure put thar by old pirates, robbers, or anybody else, an' forgot. No; whatever Ralph was goin' ter dig fur, it wa'n't ter raise up a treasure. Ef any treasure was at stake, it was one he wanted ter bury."

"The bank-robbers' plunder."

"Jest so. But how about Messenger? He looks like a city sharper. Never see'd him hauled up as a bunco-steerer, hey?"

"No. He's a sport, sure, but whether dishonest, I can't say."

"Ef thar is one honest sportin' man," avowed Eliab Godown, "he ought ter hev a monniment, an' be put up on City Hall steps, N'York. Cards an' hosses gnaw the vitals out o' a man's decency in a twinklin'. The man who shuffles pasteboards fur money, be it big or little, is on a canter for perdition, an' he has only ter go ter the race-track, bet on a sartain hoss, an' he will git ter perdition. He'll arrive dead broke, too. But that ain't ter the pint. Any more news?"

Jacob went over his story and made the peculiar points stand out more distinctly. Eliab brushed a fly from Lightfoot Peter's nose in a mechanical way.

"It won't do any harm ter keep an eye on Littleton an' Messenger. They're strangers, an' sech are allays open ter suspicion. We'll watch 'em. We're on the ground now, an' the inspector is down in N'York all on hair-edge, an' expectin' us ter nab the bank-robbers."

"We shall do it, too."

"Do it? Why, sartain we shall. The Three Innocents was never downed yit in a detective case, an' they won't be now. I guess, Jakey, we'll go back ter the village an' try ter turn another honest penny. Two humans an' a dancin' bear who spend most o' their times layin' on the grass, an' p'intin' their toes at Old Sol, Jupiter, Satan, an' other overhead planets an' stars, is liable ter create suspicion. We must git our bread by the sweat of Lightfoot Peter's brow an' your whistle."

"Why not go down to Sherwin's house?"

"He might eat up Peter, he's so cranky."

"I'd like to see him and Peter in a scrap."

Eliab shook his head gravely.

"I'm astonished!"

"At what?"

"Fur a detective, you are reprehensively bloodthirsty."

This was intended as a joke, and Eliab scrambled to his feet as he spoke, and added:

"Lightfoot Peter, arise! Take up yer carcass an' walk! Elevate yer ponderous frame an' move. There is mischief afoot, an' you must dance while we smell it out. Ha! ha!—it does me good, Jacob, ter think how we fool the natives. I das' say there ain't a more innocent, vagabondish, harmless-lookin' gang out than we be!"

Mr. Godown chuckled cheerfully. It did him a good deal of good to so deceive people, and make them think he was only a strolling nobody, earning his living by means of Peter's heels, when, really, he was always on the alert, and criminals had as much reason for fear when Peter's nose appeared in town, as though the most noted of detectives was there, instead of a mild, jolly little old man, whose double character was known to but few men.

Lightfoot Peter was an obedient animal, and he arose at the word of command and went lumbering down the dusty road with a slow and stately step.

Peter's partners had expected to find Jared Sherwin turning his household into a Bedlam of words, but, when they arrived, Direxa and Miss Lucy Cyrena were sitting on the piazza in what seemed a very calm mood, and the old gentleman was nowhere visible.

Jared and his "tantrums," as his good sister expressed it, made up a part of the daily life at the house, and though he had on this occasion gone further than usual, and insulted his daughter by making trouble in public, she was trying to ignore it.

Ralph Littleton had escorted the ladies home; then Jared had come, raved for awhile, and then gone to his room and locked himself in. After a storm, peace. With Jared, the peace after the storm meant a sulky period, during which he would not deign to address his relatives.

Up to the door Eliab Godown led his bear, with Whistling Jacob close at his heels, and the little old man was pleased to see that Direxa looked at them with curiosity and interest.

Traveling bears were objects she had rarely seen.

Eliab at once raised his shrill, cracked voice: "Maidens all an' ladies fair, we serlute you!"

JNA

Behold here the compressed, double-distilled aggragation o' superfine brilliancy an' merit, which has dazzled the Old World, and made the crowned heads caper fur joy like toddlin' babes, at sight o' this hyar onrivaled combination knowed in hist'ry, po'try an' diplomatic circles as the Three Innocents. Behold us, one an' all—man, boy an' bear; especially the bear. Behold the famed four-legged meteor who has come out o' the West like a blazin', Herculean comet. Lightfoot Peter, make yer best obeisance!"

The bear sat up and bowed as gravely as usual.

"Mercy! is he run by machinery?" exclaimed Lucy Cyrena Sherwin.

The good lady referred to Eliab, whose loquacity and ponderous words had amazed her, but Eliab did not see fit to take the hint. His face beamed with pride, and he looked at Lightfoot Peter and wagged his head sagely.

"No, esteemed madam; my bear is a human bear, though I allow that sech a brain was never before set inter a bear's head. His amaz-in' intelligence caused a royal princess o' the Old World, whose name I disrecollect jest now, ter write a poem about him, which was sum-mut like this:

'Mr. E. Godown has come ter town,
A matchless gem ter show us;
He's brought a bear with shaggy hair
An' intellect not fur below us.
We are by birth the salt of earth;
The common herd us never pleases;
But when them three shall visit me
The royal flag flies in the breezes!'

Thar was seventy-three more stanzas, but none o' the rest had quite so much pathos inter them. Some, too, was flatterin' ter me an' Whistlin' Jacob—Jacob, make yer best obeisance!"

Jacob promptly obeyed.

"Now, then, ladies fair, allow us ter give ye a sample o' what charmed the crowned heads an' made some on 'em sick—with emotion. Jacob, let loose!"

Bowing, smiling and beaming with good nature, Eliab had rattled off the foregoing as though his life depended upon it, but Jacob finally had a chance.

He whistled, and the fact that he had such a small audience did not cause him to slight his work. He whistled, and the melody caused Lucy Cyrena's severe expression to give place to one of wonder. There was something remarkable about the boy's execution, surely. The notes were wonderfully clear, and nothing seemed impossible to him. He had tricks of delivery which not one person in ten thousand could command, and these were used with the ease of one in whom was born the gift he exhibited.

The Three Innocents had attentive auditors. If Jacob was grand in his whistling act, the other corners of the triangle were very funny. Lightfoot Peter was gravity in the extreme, and he shambled around curiously, while Eliab rippled with good-humor and almost childish exuberance of spirits.

He had an eye to business, however, and when the Innocents rested from their labors, he darted up to the ladies with the ever-greedy hat extended.

"I don't very often give to no charity but the church," announced Lucy Cyrena, as she dropped a penny beside of Direxa's dime, "but I know a good thing when I see it."

"Verily, the Lord loveth a cheerful giver, and the heathen are not all in Central Africa!"

CHAPTER VI.

AND NOW CLARENCE IS INQUISITIVE.

THESE words were spoken in a drawing, nasal voice, and Eliab wheeled around and saw the ex-Reverend Clarence Piercey. The dapper little gentleman stood by with a most bland and entrancing smile on his weak little face, and seemed to be as harmless as a grinning doll, but his words were not agreeable to the leader of the detective trio.

"Heathen ain't all in Afrikay, eh?" retorted Eliab. "No; I see they ain't. When did you come away?"

"Nay, dear brother; be not severe in thy jests," answered Clarence, in gentle reproof. "Bear in mind that ladies are present—that noble sex! Dear ladies! how I revere and love them!"

And Clarence lifted his hands, and rolled his eyes upward as though trying to discern some new planet in the heavens.

Eliab was tempted to retort that, if such was the case, he pitied the ladies, but he was not at Birdseye to quarrel with any one.

"My good man," added Mr. Piercey, "will you give us another exhibition? I have not yet had a good chance to witness the antics of your valuable bear, or to listen to your wonderful boy? Please accept this small donation, and perform for my pleasure."

The speaker extended a dime, and did it with the smile still upon his face—indeed, that smile seemed to be a fixture there. Clarence would have done well to banish it; the smile was sickly.

Eliab turned to his allies.

"Let the waters o' the great deep be onchained!" he cried, in a loud voice. "Go it, my venerated contemporaries, an' I'll set down here an' enjoy a small mouthful o' prime terbarker. Whoop her up in the West Indies, Birdseye an' all way-stations!"

Mr. Godown spoke in his usual rollicking way, but Jacob received a suggestive glance which told him that Eliab had some purpose in view. What it was the boy suspected when his comrade sat down and leaned his back against a tree. He had taken the tobacco of which he had spoken, and seemed to relapse into a torpid state, but Jacob knew that Eliab had keen ears, and suspected that he was about to use them.

He was right.

Clarence ambled up to where the ladies sat, and Miss Lucy Cyrena nearly fell over a chair in her zeal to place it for the gentleman. Others might say that his smile was insipid, but she thought it charming, and her only regret was that he was not only a retired preacher, but refused to assist in any and all services, owing, no doubt, to modesty.

"Well, dear ladies, are you enjoying good health?" Mr. Piercey inquired.

"Lovely!" declared Lucy Cyrena.

"I am glad—very glad to hear it."

"We know how sympathetic you are, dear sir."

"Indeed, I am, and, ladies, I am sorry I was not at the island to act as a mediator."

"It was a sad affair!" sighed Lucy Cyrena.

"And perplexing."

"How so?"

"I have heard singular statements to the effect that Mr. Ralph Littleton had a hut built there, and was about to dig for something."

"Yes?"

"Surely, he does not expect to strike a goldmine there?"

"Well, I don't know."

"But you were with him?"

"Ye-es."

"Then I should infer you must know what his plans and purposes were?"

Clarence Piercey tried to make his smile more pretty, charming and expansive as he spoke, but it had already trespassed upon the domains of his ears; he could smile no more widely, but he did beam like the sun. Lucy Cyrena showed considerable uneasiness.

"I don't know, dear Mr. Piercey," she replied.

"Perhaps Miss Direxa does?"

Clarence turned his head and beamed upon the younger Miss Sherwin. Now, Direxa did not admire the dapper little man. From the time when he first came to Birdseye he had shown a preference for her society which annoyed her. She could not admire his sickly smile, or his soft, effeminate voice, and though the liberal way in which he gave to needy persons in the town made him exempt from many of the ills to which man is heir, she did not want his company.

To the last question she replied:

"I think I can suggest some one who does."

"Who, pray?"

"Mr. Littleton, himself!"

Clarence's face fell.

"But I thought you would also know about it."

"About what?"

"Littleton's business at the island."

"And what, pray, do you care about it?"

Direxa's manner was hostile. She did not, fortunately, inherit the Sherwin temper, and her air was lady-like in the full sense of the word, but Piercey was shown that she was not going to meet him as an adorer.

"Naturally, I am curious," he replied, weakly.

"Why should you be?"

"Well, it looks odd," declared Clarence, sulkily. "Of course, a man might build a hut on the island just out of romantic interest, but I hear that, when interrupted, Littleton was about to dig for something, and that he had a long cord tied to his spade. What was he going to do with the cord? Why was he going to dig? For what was he going to dig?"

"Them are posers!" asserted Lucy Cyrena,

and her manner indicated that she was curious, not being in the secret.

"Mr. Littleton can probably inform you," coldly added Direxa.

"Allow me to ask," persisted Clarence, "where was the exact place where he was to dig?"

Direxa arose.

"All these questions Mr. Littleton can answer, if he sees fit. From us you will get no information, for it looks to me as though you are seeking to pry into what does not concern you in the least. Excuse my plain talk, but I do not admire mischief-makers or inquisitive meddlers!"

"Direxa Estella Sherwin, be you crazy?" demanded Miss Lucy, in deepest horror. "For shame!—to speak thus to the Reverend Mr. Piercey! I am astonished at you. Verily, verily, this is awfully shocking!"

"And in this generation," deposed Clarence, rolling his eyes upward, "the viper and the scoffer goeth abroad to vex the mind of the faithful with grievous words of levity and unkindness, and unseemly contentions affright the minds of those devoted to the cause of holiness!"

"Hear his lovely terms!" uttered Lucy Cyrena, attempting to roll her eyes as Clarence had rolled his.

Direxa's disgust seemed to increase, and, without any further words, she turned and entered the house.

"This pains me!" declared Clarence.

"So it does me."

"But we must remember that the lady is young."

"And foolish!"

"You were at the island, Miss Sherwin?"

"I was."

"Did they not confide in you?"

"Not a word. I went out with them, and, in spite of my protest, we landed. When we got to the top of the island, Direxa began to wander about like an unquiet ghost. Finally she says, says she: 'This is the place!'"

"Where were you then?" Piercey eagerly asked.

"On top of the knoll."

"But the particular spot?"

"I can't tell any more than you. It was all a jungle there, and one place seemed like another."

"What did Littleton do next?"

"Next," replied Lucy Cyrena, severely, "Direxa trotted me away to look at the hut, and there she kept me. I can now see that it was part of an infamous plot, but she made elaborate excuses, and she kept me in that miserable shanty. What Littleton did, or where he went, I don't know. I am now sorry that I took his part."

The speaker was frequently sorry for what she did, for her impetuosity led her to act hastily. She made it a point to be ready to encounter her brother whenever he threw down the glove of war, and had only lived up to her record when on the island, but her present state of mind was brought about solely by her weakness for the Reverend Clarence.

"Who is this Littleton, anyhow?" Piercey abruptly asked.

"A young man from New York."

"What is his business?"

"I believe he is an engraver on wood."

"Humph!—and he has got so rich that he can come up here, pass the summer and do no work!"

The dapper little man spoke quite roughly, and the sickly smile died out in his face. He had contracted his brows in a frown, and seemed perplexed and suspicious.

"I don't know much about him. He comes often to see Direxa, and that's all I know."

"It's my opinion that he is no better than he ought to be!"

Usually, Lucy Cyrena would have agreed fully with anything that her companion said, but she had some prudence left. She believed that Direxa was capable of forming accurate judgments, and using the same; and as she had for some time had a theory that young Littleton might yet come into the family, it would be just as well to exercise prudence.

Consequently, she blandly observed that every one appeared to think well of the young New Yorker, and she presumed he was all right. Then she referred to the lateness of the hour, spoke of her household duties, excused herself, and left the caller. He did not delay in taking his leave.

He had forgotten The Three Innocents, but they were still there. The "show" was over, and Jacob was rolling upon the ground by Peter's side, and playfully pulling the bear's

ears; while Eliab sat by the tree with his mouth wide open and his eyes fast closed, apparently sound asleep.

Clarence looked first at him and then at Jacob.

"How beautiful is youth!" pronounced the gentleman, uplifting his hands. "Thus is it with us in the morning of our lives; we gambol on the greensward like lambs. Lovely, and inexpressively sweet, is youth!"

He smiled his broadest smile upon Jacob, but that youth gave no sign that he heard. With his face averted, he continued to pull Peter's ears, and Clarence moved on his way, reached the main street, and, bowing and grinning to every one he saw, went to his home.

As he receded, Jacob raised his head and looked after him with a peculiar expression.

"Gammon!" was his terse comment.

Eliab Godown opened his eyes.

"How lovely is youth!" mimicked the leader of the Innocents. "How sweet things be, b'mighty! How fresh is natur', an' how fresh is that critter! Say, Jakey, ef I had that chap's grin, I'd hang it up in the cornfield ter scare off crows!"

With this comment Eliab scrambled to his feet.

"Lightfoot Peter, arise!" he added. "Take yerself up an' walk. Jacob, foller whar I lead, fur I hev words o' wisdom ter speak inter yer ears."

CHAPTER VII.

SOUNDS WHICH HAVE A MEANING.

The Three Innocents went slowly down the road.

"Jakey, what d'ye think o' the parson?" Godown asked.

"I don't believe he is one."

"No, fur he's retired from service—"

"I don't believe he ever was a minister. Men of that profession have some dignity, and a certain air that lifts them above the common level. Who ever saw a minister going around and grinning like a hyena, and talking in a voice so flat that it would make a school-girl sick? If you ever see such a man, Eliab, steer clear of him; he's no good. A silly minister is only to be found when some dude trips nature up and gets into the business, instead of teaching school in an asylum for the feeble-minded. No, sir; Clarence don't fill my idea of a minister, and I don't believe he is one."

"That's a pint I hadn't thought on," gravely replied Eliab, "but I shall think on it now. I judge that you don't like him."

"I don't."

"Nor me."

"Why is he so interested in the island? It is a mean little knoll, covered with pines and other timber, which none of the farmers here would clear off for it; yet Littleton and Piercey are mightily in love with it."

"An' Clarry seems mad 'cause Ralph is interested."

"Just so."

"Jacob Petts, you an' me want ter take a squint at that island."

"Right, Eliab."

"Can you show me whar Ralph had his spade grounded, an' the rope tied to it, when he was stopped in his work?"

"I can."

"Then we'll go thar ter-night. I noticed that a raft was by the shore up yender—we'll git that an' paddle over. Folks go ter bed in the country at nine o'clock; we'll wait ontel twelve, an' then go over."

"Eliab," said the youth, lowering his voice, "you suspect that we are on the track of our bank-robbers?"

"Petts," quoth Mr. Godown, "him who suspects kin never be sure he's right. We won't suspect nobody untill you hev the lasso over his neck an' the proof in hand; but what should we investigate, ef not the things we consider queer? Mysteries in the country are not as they be in the city—that is, they are not so thick that they tumble over each other in the streets! But it'll amuse us, anyhow, ter look at that air island an' artom."

With this non-committal reply Eliab winked wisely at his young ally, and the discussion ended.

Their next step was to look for quarters for the night. The detective trio never went out on an expedition without plenty of money, but they clung closely to their assumed character, and never hired good quarters. Usually, they begged for a place to sleep as meekly as a tramp of the harmless order.

Eliab, on this occasion, had his eye on a barn near the pond, and when he learned that the

owner was a good-natured man who had taken considerable notice of them at the village when they gave their first exhibition, he made his request freely, but respectfully.

It was granted. The farmer thought that the applicants had honest faces, and they were promptly told that they could sleep in the barn.

Next they visited their quarters, paid the farmer for a frugal supper, and, sundown being near at hand, again visited the main street and repeated their exhibition. This time there was nothing to interrupt, and Jacob and the bear fairly "caught the town." The boy, in particular, was voted a wonder, and every other boy in the place began to practice anew the art of whistling.

Some trouble was experienced in shaking off the young admirers when the show was over, but it was done at last, and the trio went to the barn. It lacked three hours of midnight, and, as Eliab possessed the gift of being able to awaken very close to a desired time, they lay down to sleep for a while.

Twelve o'clock found them astir. Lightfoot Peter then became a fifth wheel to the coach, so to speak. He was not wanted during the expedition, but they had before then had unpleasant experiences in leaving him behind—owing to visits of outsiders—so Peter had to go along.

When The Three Innocents emerged from the barn all was dark and quiet. Not a light was visible in the village. Jacob led the way to the pond, and they were soon beside the raft, which was duly launched.

Now, Lightfoot Peter was an obedient bear, but he had never shone in public life as a sailor, and did not wish to. He objected to embarking on the raft, and some delay occurred, but he had a conscientious regard for duty, and finally yielded to the inevitable.

The raft was pushed out from shore. Eliab and Jacob had provided themselves with boards well shaped for paddling, and they went to work zealously, while Peter stood timidly in the middle of the concern and rolled a doubtful, reproachful eye around.

In due time the island was reached, and they went ashore.

They ascended through the thick underbrush and soon reached the hut, which was dark and deserted. There they paused to light a lantern, knowing that the jungle of pines, big and little, would shut in the light.

Eliab held the lantern above his head and looked curiously at the hut.

"Quite a palace," he observed.

"But no princess in it," Jacob replied.

"Skeercely; an' I'm glad thar ain't. We don't want spies. The place is empty as Clarence Piercey's head, ain't it?"

"Just about."

"No clew ter why 'twas built, or how 'tis used."

"I think you will find that the builder had not got far along. He was interrupted just as the business part was about to begin."

"That looks reasonable. Wal, we'll go out an' see what he was goin' ter dig fur—or, at least, see the place."

Jacob had no trouble in locating it. The spade and the rope had disappeared, and it was probable that Ralph had taken them when he left the place, though Jacob was not sure, but the latter had marked the place well by the trees.

They found the very place where the spade had been thrust into the earth.

"Kinder curious!" Eliab observed. "As you tol' me, it is where that big tree once stood. The tree ain't been blown over more nor a year, I should say, though the loose earth which the roots nat'rally lifted up has fell back an' filled up the cavity about even. Now, d'ye see anything curious?"

"Several things."

"So do I. Whatever Ralph was goin' ter dig fur ain't been under earth long. A year or two ago that tree stood here, an' you hev only ter look at the size on't ter see that nothin' was buried under it. Hence, the article was buried o' late, sence the tree blown over."

"Where did the rope come in?" Jacob asked.

"My boy, that's *your* question; I can't say."

"I believe I can."

"Good! Go on!"

"Littleton never intended to dig here."

"No?"

Eliab turned around in some surprise.

"No!" Jacob replied. "I have been puzzling over the very point you mention, and believe I have solved it, in a measure. Absurd as it may look, at first, I think that rope was brought here to measure something. What, if not distance? Why was it tied to the spade, unless to measure away from that point?"

"Jacob Petts, you are a good 'un. Go on!"

"We will infer that something was buried. He who did it wished for secrecy. He put it at a certain point, and measured the distance to other points. This tree was one of them—let us say that the desired place is twelve feet from here. Well, when Littleton arrived, he found the tree uprooted. What would be the natural resort in such a case? Why, to drive the spade in where the tree had stood, and then take the measure just the same."

Eliab rubbed his hands together in great good humor.

"Solid!" he declared. "Solid, as your ideas generally be."

"But it leaves us all in the dark."

"How?"

"Where are we to dig?"

Mr. Godown's face grew grave.

"If my theory is correct," Jacob pursued, the buried *something* lies in a certain direction, a certain number of feet away. Which way? And how many feet?"

"Petts, you rend my feelins' onmerciful, but you are solid. I maintain that, whatever befalls us; but we are all at sea. We might as well set up on that tree-trunk an' bark like a fractious dog as ter hunt here. My idee is that we'd better not hunt, at all—at least, that we had better not dig up the 'arth around here, an' so give away the fact that somebody has been here. How do we know, anyhow, that the case is of interest ter us? We're in Birdseye ter ketch bank-robbers. Why should we nose around sech small secrets as these?"

Eliab spoke with ill-humor not usual to him. He believed fully in Jacob's theory; and the fact that they had come out on a trip which could bring no results, since they did not know where to dig, annoyed him.

"But this case may connect with ours," urged the youth.

"How can it?"

"We have always worked on the doctrine that nothing is too small to slight. We—or, at least, I—have marked three men as worthy of our attention here—George Messenger, Ralph Littleton and Clarence Piercey—"

"Still down on the parson!"

"Wait! We have no proof that Piercey is one, except his word, and I wouldn't give much for that. That man, and his weak, constant, silly grin, and his little, die-away voice, influence me strangely. I don't like Piercey; I doubt him!"

The youth spoke with a good deal of firmness, and Eliab, who rarely differed from him, recovered his usual serenity.

"We'll watch the man. As you say, a man with a silly grin is not ter be trusted. He's either a fool or a rascal, an' one is as dangerous as t'other. S'pose we look the island over a bit? Lightfoot Peter has laid down an' gone ter sleep; we'll leave him an' go pokin' around an' artom."

Jacob did not object. He did not see that any good was likely to come of it, for it was not probable that secrets were lying around loose, but Eliab was a thorough-going person, and owed much of his success as a detective to the fact that he never slighted trifles.

They moved toward the southern end of the island, the leader using the lantern to the best advantage. Few things escaped his keen eyes. The ground and the trees were alike subjected to scrutiny. He deserved well, but reached the lower end of the high land without discovery.

There he paused and began to comment in his unique way, but he was rudely interrupted.

A human yell of pain or fear, or both, suddenly arose from the place they had just left, and then came a savage growling, followed by terrified screeches.

"Land o' Canaan!" cried Eliab, "somebody's in a scrap with Lightfoot Peter!"

CHAPTER VIII.

PETER TAKES OFF HIS COAT.

ELIAB had not spoken recklessly. No one could doubt that the growls came from an animal of the bear kind, and Peter was the only bear in Birdseye. It was quite as clear that the human yells were those of some one in great terror or pain, or both, and the explanation was easy. Somebody had run into the dancing bear, and into trouble, at one and the same time.

"The bear will kill him!" exclaimed Whistling Jacob.

"Or he may poke Peter in the ribs with a knife. Ef he does that, I'll make him a sorry man!"

Before the words were out of Eliab's mouth, he was running at full speed toward the scene of encounter, and his young ally kept by his side. The disturbance continued. The unknown man

yelled lustily, while the bear growled and roared fiercely, and his master knew his pet's temper had been seriously upset.

They broke through a thicket, and Eliab held up the lantern to discern the cause of commotion.

As he did so, he had a momentary view of a pair of human legs sticking up above the bushes like two telegraph poles—then they disappeared, and a tremendous crashing indicated that man and bear had fallen down a bank.

Once more Eliab and Jacob hurried forward. The bank was several feet high, but a foreign, dark object at the foot met their gaze, and they at once leaped down.

There was Lightfoot Peter, growling and kicking around, and tearing at some object which he held between his paws.

"Great snakes! he's killed him!" Godown gasped.

"Killed whom? He's not got anybody there; that's only a piece of cloth."

Jacob saw a chance to secure the article, as he spoke, and he reached down and snatched it away.

"Holy smoke!" muttered Eliab.

"It's a man's coat!"

"Sure's you live."

"Where did it come from?"

"It ain't mine—"

"Bah! why are we so stupid? It belonged to the man with whom Peter has fought, and the bear has actually taken it off from him!"

Eliab broke into a hearty laugh.

"But the man—"

"Sure enough," Eliab interrupted, suddenly becoming grave. "We mustn't forget the man. Has Peter killed him, or has he got off an' run away?"

The bear had recognized his friends and condescended to relapse into silence and a certain degree of composure, and this enabled Eliab and Jacob to listen. Not an unusual sound was to be heard. The former gave the lantern a sweep around, but no prostrate form was revealed.

"He's got away!" Eliab exclaimed.

"Crawled off on the sly."

"Yes. You stay here with Peter, an' I'll see if I can't head the varmint off an' ketch him."

The speaker set down the lantern and hurried away. He did not know what had occurred, but was pretty sure that the unknown was sufficiently frightened to make good use of his time, and leave the island if he could. Naturally, the encounter with Peter must have been a big surprise, and it was doubtful if the man had even yet learned with what he had fought. Possibly he thought it a veritable demon.

Down to the shore Eliab hurried, and the result proved that he had gone in just the right direction. The belt of water-covered land, with its crop of uprising dead trees, which encircled the island at all points, was just there only about fifty yards wide, and the leafless trees gave Eliab a good view of the open water.

And there he saw a boat moving away as fast as the strokes of a pair of oars could send it, and that was saying a good deal—the rower was bending his back to the work with frantic haste.

Eliab promptly sat down, rested his elbows upon his knees and his chin upon his hands and watched the boat recede. He knew that the man's escape could not be prevented. The detective trio had only a clumsy raft, and that could not compete with the more buoyant craft. Neither could Godown swim out and overtake it.

Clearly, there was but one thing to do; it must be allowed to go unmolested.

This was not pleasant, but the detective soon broke into an amused chuckle. In every way the runaway exhibited wild alarm, and as he had not probably seen any men, and had been so roughly handled by the bear, it was likely that he would not soon forget his experience.

He watched until the boat reached the shore next to the village. Beyond that point he could not, in the dim light, see the man, and he arose and went back to his ally. He found Jacob sitting down and holding the coat in his hands.

"The varmint has got off," observed Eliab.

"I judged so."

"He had a boat, an' he pulled away like all creation. I'll bet Peter scared him so he won't grow no more fur years ter come. A female cousin o' mine was bit by a mouse when she was twenty-nine, an' it stunted her growth prodigious. Pity the bear didn't hang on ter more than he did."

"He took the man's coat off."

"Yes; an' it wa'n't no small feat. Never knowed that Peter aspired ter be a varlet be-

fore. Varlet is French fur a servant that helps you ter dress an' undress, when you're too blamed proud ter do it yerself. Jacob Petts, who was that man?"

"I didn't see him."

"Why was he here?"

"I don't know."

"Didn't it grow out o' what happened here ter-day?"

"I suspect it did."

"Lemme see the coat."

It was passed over, and he examined it critically.

"Fine an' expensive cloth, an' not made in Birdseye. Country clothes is slouchy, city clothes is stylish an' trim. Petts, we hev a clew here: we must diskiver the owner o' this coat."

Jacob had been sitting and watching his ally very quietly, but he now reached out, took the coat, separated the cloth and the lining, and showed Eliab a white piece of goods stitched inside, upon which something was written.

"Read!" he tersely directed.

Eliab obeyed, and then raised his head quickly.

"Ralph Littleton!" he exclaimed.

"Just so."

"By jinks! was he our man?"

"So it looks."

"There's his name, anyhow. I thank ye for showin' it ter me, an' an old stager like me hadn't ought ter needed it. I've seed' garments afore where the tailor put in the owner's name thusly. Hum! hum! Littleton is bound ter git what he wants here. Sorry he an' Peter run up ag'in' each other."

"You have not heard all, my good sir. Naturally, I have made a very thorough search of this garment. In one of the pockets I found this paper. It is, as you can readily see, a letter, and you will observe that it is dated just a week ago, and written from New York. I will let it tell the rest of the story itself."

He handed over the sheet of paper, and Eliab hastened to read. In a bold, systematic hand he found these lines:

"DEAR X Y Z:—This is to ask you to bait the bear and be on the picket-post. The good ship Boodle has touched the pier, and the cargo is discharged. There is one lot of prime green silks, and one of steel plates. Neither is marketable, for obvious reasons, and must be absorbed in the trust. We shall ship the same, and look to you to protect from wind and weather. The green silks will clothe our wives and line our pockets in good shape, when once we can put them on the market. (They are of a fashion that never changes.) The value will draw on a V and four zeros, or near it. The steel plates is a cumbersome lot, but of high pressure, and well worth storing. Look out for Centrals. We know of no stir, but they know the ship is in, and may forage close for rations. Lock the barn before the horse is stolen. We look to you to use extra caution, for it would be tough to lose the stuff. Butter and cheese are a bit stiffer, and eggs, of late vintage, sell at sight.

Z Y X."

Eliab whistled softly.

"Say, we're onto the bank-robbers!" he exclaimed.

"I believe you."

"That's the only way ter explain this. At first blush the whole thing seems ter be outrageous rubbish, but that is method in it. It's part slang, an' the rest is meant ter be so blind that only the receiver o' the letter would understand. He was, o' course, expectin' it. 'Bait the bear' don't refer ter Peter, by a good 'eal, an' I don't fully ketch on. 'Be on the picket-post,' means ter be on the alert. 'The good ship Boodle has touched the pier,' means that the bank has been robbed. 'Prime green silks,' means bank-notes, an' 'steel-plates' must be money in coins, gold or silver. 'A V and four zeros,' means \$50,000; and 'look out for Centrals,' means detectives from the Central Office. The stuff about butter, cheese an' eggs is a joke, I das' say."

"You interpret it about as I did."

"Great Scott! an' Peter had our robber-receiver right in his arms, an' he got away!"

"But left a marked coat!"

"Marked 'Ralph Littleton!'"

"Yes."

"That lad had an honest face, an' I sort o' hate ter think ill o' him, but what else kin we do? We can't overlook all this evidence."

"There's no getting around the fact that we are on the trail of the bank-robbers."

"An' it looks as though this bill was ter play an important part in the game."

"It is not the place I should select to secrete paper money, but every man to his taste. But, Eliab, if we assume that Ralph is the Birdseye ally of the robbers, isn't he making a mess of it? Why did he bring Direxa Sherwin and her aunt

here? Depend upon it, they are not in the game."

Mr. Godown rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"Some things look queer," he admitted. "Miss Lucy Sherwin tol' Clarence Dade Piercey that, when she, her niece an' Littleton went ter the island, Direxa wandered about awhile, an' then stopped an' says ter him, 'This is the place.' An' then she got the old lady away, an' Ralph got his spade an' cord, an' was about ter begin work, when Jared Sherwin's gang interrupted. That looks as though Direxa had information not knowed by Ralph, but she would not go there ter show him where ter bury stolen money."

"Eliab, we are not fully 'on,' yet."

"Mebbe, you're right."

"We haven't grasped the whole mystery, but I have not one doubt as to this note; it is from the bank-robbers to their ally here, whom we are to catch."

"An' we'll do it. Ter-morrer, Petts, we'll find out somethin' about this coat. I've got enough o' the island, fur ter-night, an' I move that we go home. No more is ter be diskivered here. We'll only stop ter see if our late visitor left any more signs."

CHAPTER IX.

THE FLASHY MAN SHOWS A SCAR.

THE additional search was made, but nothing came of it. Not even a lantern was found. It was thought probable that the prowler had run upon Lightfoot Peter almost at the start, and that he had gained no information, if that was what he came for. However that may have been, he had certainly no reason to complain that his trip had been uneventful, and it was likely that the clothes which Peter left upon him bore some marks of the encounter.

Eliab considered the whole affair unfortunate. Would not the man recognize the fact that his assailant had been a bear, and, consequently, suspect The Three Innocents? This seemed likely, but it was by no means sure. The encounter had been a surprise; the darkness had been intense; and there was some hope he had been so frightened that he could not tell whether he had met a bear, or some infernal imp.

The detective trio returned to the raft and again crossed the pond.

Considerable caution was used. They first landed above the village, and only ventured to return the raft to where they had found it when a reconnaissance had satisfied them that the coast was clear.

Then they returned to the barn and slept the night out.

Godown had been turning over sundry plans in his mind, but all were put aside when, early in the morning, a boy appeared and said that Ralph Littleton would like to have Jacob come to his room.

Now, this was in keeping with the young man's promise made at the island, when he told the youth that he would "see him again," but, in view of later discoveries, suspicions and events, it looked as though considerable importance might be attached to it.

A nod from Eliab settled Jacob's course, and he went with the other boy. He was conducted to a neat, white cottage, and was soon in Ralph's room.

The latter was taking life easy. The day was warm, and he was without coat or vest. He was reclining in an easy-chair, smoking a cigar. This was a point in his favor—if he had been smoking a cigarette, Jacob would have decided him guilty at once, for cigarettes and good character, in Jacob's opinion, seldom went together.

He was cheerfully greeted and told to sit down. He obeyed, and, as he did so, looked critically at his companion.

Ralph bore no evidence of having been in a fight with a bear; he was without a mark, and looked bright, fresh and contented.

"How do you find yourself this morning?" he asked.

"Quite well, thank you," Jacob answered.

"How is the bear?"

"He's able to make a good breakfast."

"Have you and your associates come far?"

"We've been on the tramp ever since spring, sir."

"Do you like it?"

"Oh! yes."

"You look too intelligent for the work."

"So is Lightfoot Peter, but he, like myself, is willing to begin low on the ladder. Many great men have, and there is no telling how Peter and I may rise."

Ralph appreciated the joke, and smiled in a friendly way.

"You took my part at the island yesterday," he added.

"I did tell you to skip while you had a chance," Jacob acknowledged.

"And it was good advice. It came at a time when I appreciated it, and I then and there determined to reward you for your good-will. Here is one dollar. The sum is small, but perhaps it will be welcome."

"Bless me, sir!" Jacob answered; "I don't deserve it. I did you no service, only to give a hint."

"But that was valuable, as I said before. Let me ask you to accept this trifle."

The young detective really thought that he had not earned the money, but it would not do for one in his position to refuse such a thing. He took it, and thanked the giver politely.

Littleton lay back in his chair lazily, and proceeded to enjoy his cigar. His visitor improved the chance to look around. Ralph wore no coat. Where was it? Had it been taken off by Lightfoot Peter? There was no good evidence of this; a man of Ralph's standing would have more than one coat, and if he had lost any, he would, one would suppose, be all the more careful to have a garment of the kind upon his back.

Something else caught Jacob's attention. He was sitting by a table, and upon it was a pile of books and papers. Nearer to the boy than anything else was a solitary envelope, the superscription looking him full in the face, as it were.

It was Ralph Littleton's name, but that was not what made Jacob grow deeply interested at once. The bold, flowing writing was familiar—so very familiar that the observer was staggered. It was as much like the writing found in the pocket of the coat as were two peas!

He flashed a glance at Ralph. The latter was lazily watching the smoke of his cigar curl upward. Back went Jacob's gaze, and fairly devoured the post-mark. It was "New York," and the date was only two days previous.

This was startling. The burglar's letter, written in what seemed to be the same penmanship, had, presumably, also just come from New York.

How Jacob coveted that envelope! If he had it, comparison would show whether it matched the burglar's note. Could he get it?—without exciting suspicion? He had only to drop his hand over it and the deed was done, but was it safe? Would it not be missed, and suspicion thereby awakened?

Littleton suddenly aroused.

"Jacob," said he, "I hate to confess it, but I am lazy this morning—I did not sleep well last night, and I feel fagged out. I want a few things sent over from the store. Will you stop, as you go back, and order them?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good! I'll write off the list."

He looked around, and then added:

"Will you hand me the envelope which is at your elbow?"

Jacob half-closed his eyes to hide the sudden sparkle which crept into them, and very quietly passed over the desired article. His companion scribbled carelessly with a pencil for a few moments, and then passed the envelope back.

"You have only to give the order," he explained; "they will send the articles all right. Here is a quarter for your trouble."

The young detective expressed his thanks, but did not say, as he felt, that the envelope was worth a pile of "quarters." He was soon outside of the house, but he had no intention of parting with the envelope. He put it in his pocket, and going to the store, gave the order orally.

Then he went back to the barn.

He entered with some haste, but moderated his excitement when he saw that Eliab was not alone. George Messenger was there, tipped back in an old chair, and taking life easy.

"Hallo!" observed the flashy man; "here's our musical prodigy."

"He is around," Eliab admitted.

"Been out giving a concert, my lad?" Messenger continued.

"No, sir."

"You ought to put your talents to better advantage than you do. D'ye know it?"

"What would you suggest?"

"Whistle in New York City. Why, a wonder like you would be good for any stage. I've called around to make a business proposition. I have some influence, and I'll give you a lift in the world if you say so—in brief, put you into service on the boards. I can do it anytime, after a few days. Just now I am dead broke, but I expect some money from a friend in a few days, and when I get the green silks, I'll start

out as your business manager. What d'ye say?"

Jacob said nothing; he was overpowered. The offer made him had not accomplished this result, but something else had. Messenger had referred to the money—presumably, to bank-notes—as "green silks." The term was peculiar; the young detective had chanced upon it but once before, and that case had occurred in the bank-robber's letter.

Eliab came to the rescue.

"Now, don't you go ter temptin' my boy!" he expostulated. "I couldn't think o' partin' from him. Why, Lightfoot Peter an' me would waste away ter mere shadders o' grief."

"But I would make it an object to you, also."

"The Three Innocents combination musn't be broke."

"Jacob, have you no ambition?"

"I'm afraid I haven't any more than my present business calls for"—Messenger did not suspect how much that meant—"for I am very well satisfied as it is."

"He shall think it over, though," piped Eliab.

"I ain't goin' ter be selfish, an' stand in the way o' the boy makin' a good, fat livin'. He shall think it over, my frien'."

"All right. And I hope he will remember that money is the lever which moves the world, and throw no chance away. By the way, I was over to the island, again, last night!"

The announcement was carelessly made, but Messenger had two very attentive companions, right away.

"Anything new?" asked Eliab, trying to be as careless as his visitor.

"Nothing stirring there but myself. I stirred a good deal, however—fell off of a bank, and got that beauty-mark."

The speaker shoved up his sleeve, and revealed a scratch on his arm which extended from his wrist to his elbow.

"A dead pine twig caught me there, and it drew the blood freely. Almost tore the coat off of me."

Messenger looked at his companions and smiled in a good-natured way. Jacob longed to glance at his friend, but dared not.

"Looks as though you had been fightin' a wildcat," commented Eliab.

"Or your bear?"

Jacob was dumfounded.

"Didn't see Peter out, did ye?" serenely inquired Godown.

"No. Was he out?"

"Not arter dark."

"I'm not sure but I should like to go around with the animal myself. He's a good deal of a bear, and I rather take to the life of a vagabond. I've drifted around the world a good bit, and seen some pretty wild times, all of which have served to make a regular Wandering Jew of me. I crave excitement and change, and am never so happy as when I am in some happy-go-lucky, dare-devil exploit."

If Messenger was "giving himself away," he was doing it with a vengeance, but there he sat and smiled at them with the appearance of a man whose mind and conscience were wholly at ease. Had his reference to Lightfoot Peter been accidental, or was it a would-be crafty attempt to sound them?

Eliab did not know, but he felt a strong desire to "pump" the visitor in return, and did not see how he was going to do it.

CHAPTER X.

PETER PLAGUES THE PARSON.

"Why is it," Eliab asked, "that a man who craves excitement as you do, should come ter a small place like this?"

"Easy explained," Messenger answered. "It's in the line of my business. I have schemes under way now which would startle you if you knew of them."

"Why?" was the blunt question.

"Because they are daring and audacious."

"In what way?"

"Never mind. A secret told is worth no gold, as my good grandmother used to say. She told all her secrets, and never got rich. I profit by her example and fly low. Well, I must go. Jacob, bear in mind what I have said, and then decide to come under my wing. I'll make it an object. You can whistle like an angel, and such talent musn't be thrown away. Come under my wing. So-long!"

Speaking airily, Messenger had moved toward the door, and at the last words he waved his hand and went out. He took a direct course, and they could see him as he walked away with a springy step. They did watch, and in silence, until conversation was safe. Then Godown

turned to his young ally, shut one eye, and dryly observed:

"Over ter the island last night, was he? Fell down a bank, did he? Scratched his arm on a twig, did he? Wants ter know ef Peter was out does he? Hum! hum! hum!"

"Eliab, do you remember your motto?—never suspect until you know!"

"Petts, in a case like this, rules an' precedents may go ter thunder! I do suspect Messenger. He is here on business, is he? Craves excitement an' wild times, does he? Never so happy as when in a dare-devil exploit, is he? Got a scheme on foot which would startle us, ef we knowed on't, has he? Hum! hum!"

The boy had slyly drawn out the envelope secured from Ralph Littleton's room.

"Partner, feast your eyes on that," he directed.

"Hum! An envelope addressed ter Littleton, post-marked New York. Late date, too, as the post-mark shows—Say, whose writin' is this?"

Eliab had made a start and suddenly grown eager.

"Did you ever see any like it?"

For answer the detective leader hurriedly drew from his pocket the letter which Peter had secured for them. He spread it out and laid it beside the envelope. If the resemblance had been striking before, it had become doubly so.

"It's the same!" uttered Eliab. "Say, where'd you git it?"

His ally gave a terse history of the envelope, as far as he knew it.

"The same hand writ both!" Godown declared.

"Look at the letters separate; same turn in each. By gracious! we've got the clew!"

"A moment ago you were ready to suspect George Messenger."

"I s'pect 'em both. They are strangers here, an' it's a safe bet that they are in town ter work the racket tergether. Now, we hev our men spotted!"

"What if it should be neither of them?"

"But it is—an' it's both. The New York end o' the chain o' rascality writ ter Littleton. Last night he went ter the island for some reason, fell up ag'in' Lightfoot Peter an' lost his coat. He had the tell-tale letter with him, but not the envelope. This mornin', arter seeing Messenger, he sent the latter here ter pump us. The two are in cahoots, an' they are our game!"

Jacob was staggered for a moment, but he soon rallied.

"Let me ask you a few questions," he suggested.

"Go on!"

"If it was Littleton who went to the island, how did Messenger get the scratch on his arm?"

"In some other way," was the prompt reply.

"But why did he show the scratch, why did he try to give us the idea that he was a wild sort of a fellow, and why was he so utterly reckless as to state that he had been to the island? Would he not thus start all our suspicions without any gain to him?"

Eliab was slow with his reply, but it came at last:

"Probably he can prove an *alibi*, an' he did it ter draw suspicion away from Littleton, knowin' we had the letter—or, at least, suspectin' it."

"Then," added Jacob, swiftly, "why did Littleton send for me, give me that envelope, and deliberately put crushing evidence into our hands? If he and Messenger are the culprits, and they thought we had the letter, why did they furnish just the connecting link we wanted?"

And he tapped his finger upon the envelope.

This time Eliab had no reply ready. He shook his head, looked again at the letter and the envelope, meditated, and wound up with the frank confession:

"I'm beat; I admit it! All this, hows'ever, only goes ter show that a deep, cunning game is afoot; that we hev ter deal with men as wily as they are dangerous. I've tramped the sods with my bear-and-boy combination a good many year, an' never yet did I know o' the enemy gittin' on ter the racket, or suspectin' that I was more than a happy-go-lucky cld vagabond, until the net closed around him. This time, I guess that the opposition is onter us."

"You may believe that, but I am not going to until the knowledge is forced upon me. As you say, The Three Innocents have fooled them all in the past; I don't believe the combination has lost its charm."

The younger detective exhibited an amount of confidence which at once aroused his associate's wavering courage.

"Why, of course—of course," he returned. "You're solid, as usual. The combination is all right; no rogue kin pick it ter pieces, an' you will find us come up smilin' in the end o' the

fight. Wal, Petts, what d'ye say? Shall we go out an' give the folks a sample o' our skill?"

"I suppose we had better, in order to account for our prolonged stay in town. Yes; let's go out."

Lightfoot Peter was sleeping the sleep of the just, but he was notified that there was work to do. They went out and walked to the village square, and Eliab relapsed into his own self in outward appearance—he became the jolly, cheerful vagabond, and piloted Peter along as though he had no ambition in the world further than that.

They soon rounded the corner by 'Si French's store, and found the usual crowd of loafers there. A country store beats the world in the line of loafers, though they are more annoying than dangerous. Eliab beamed upon this particular congregation of unemployed talent.

"Now, gents, don't you think we want ter get all yer cash an' bullion, fur we ain't gluttons. We hev come ter Birdseye an' been received like lords o' the land, an' there is a tender spot in our hearts fur you citizens. But that ain't all—thar is also a tender spot in Lightfoot Peter's nigh forrard shoulder, an' we are reluctant ter force him ter travel in sech condition."

It may be remarked that the lameness referred to always assailed Peter, if his master was to be believed, when The Three Innocents wished to linger at any place, and the bear was so well trained that, when commanded, he would limp, but the lameness was a myth, a deception, and a snare.

"Now, then," added Godown, briskly, "as the infirmity don't hinder Peter from dancin' on his hind legs, we will proceed ter give an exhibition. We will conduct it on jest the same lines that so affected the crowned heads o' Europe, an' led one o' the princesses ter discompose an epic poem beginnin' thusly:

"All hail! ye glorious shootin' stars!
We yield ye love an' adoration;
With you ter cheer our lonesome hours,
The heavily stars may go ter thunderation."

"That sounds an artom rude, but a princess o' royal blood must be allowed ter hev her say. That princess had hern. Now, then, Innocents, heads up an' make ready fur biz. Lightfoot Peter, scratch gravell Whistlin' Jacob, twist yer lips. All hands, make yer best obeisance! Let her go!"

The exhibition began, and Jacob soon proved that he had lost none of his ability. His wonderful whistling again held them spellbound, and Lightfoot Peter swung around in the same awkward circles as of old. There were men in the crowd who had seen a good many dancing-bear combinations in their day, but they freely admitted that all others were put in the shade by The Three Innocents.

As the performance ended, the Reverend Clarence Piercey moved through the crowd. His stereotyped smile was as broad and as sickly as ever, and, raising both hands, he spoke in a voice even more die-away and silly than usual:

"This sight cheers me beyond the power of description. It is good to have relaxation from the severer duties of life now and then, and though I do not approve of levity, harmless amusement is good for all. How sweet is life! With the dear birds of the air, the lovely flowers of the garden, the odoriferous grasses of the field, and the sweetness of perfect content; well may we say that our lot is cast in pleasant places! Dear friends, how pretty and lovely it is to have men thus tender in their daily association one with another!"

Eliab Godown was moved even more than Clarence, but in a different way. That any man could be so silly astonished him, and he became in a fever to get away from that voice and that smile.

Not so with another member of the combination.

Lightfoot Peter had settled down stoically when the dancing was over, and, apparently, lost all interest in things earthly, but he pricked up his ears and grew interested when Clarence spoke. There are different ideas as to what constitutes eloquence, and there was room to suspect that Peter was deeply moved. But he did not get into a frame of mind in accord with the orator's. On the contrary, his manner became belligerent, and he suddenly uttered a ferocious growl, swung around and laid violent hold of Mr. Piercey.

The latter uttered a melancholy, feminine-like screech.

"Oh! oh!" he cried, in terror. "Save me from this horrid beast! I shall be killed! Take him off—please take the dreadful thing off, or I shall faint!"

Clarence struggled feebly, and tried in vain to

pull away. Peter had him fast, and his repeated growls made the dapper little man as pale as a sheet. Yet, he was receiving no injury; the bear's claws were tightly fixed in the man's coat, and his hold was firm, but he offered no further violence.

"Oh! please, please take away the dreadful animal!" wailed Clarence, piteously.

Eliab had been dumfounded by the bear's outbreak, but he at last aroused, sprung forward, caught Peter by the throat, and began to box his ears soundly.

"Let up, ye 'tarnal critter!" he commanded. "What in time d'ye mean by sech reprehensible rudeness?"

"Oh! put a muzzle on him, so he won't bite me!" implored Clarence. "My flesh is awful tender, and if he should scratch me, I might get cold in it. Oh! dear Mr. Godown, please don't let him hurt me!"

Tears rolled down the speaker's face, and his voice trembled and quavered in a way that was very comical to all but himself.

CHAPTER XI.

JACOB ADMIRES THE POST MARK.

LIGHTFOOT PETER was not in a very dangerous mood, and he condescended to loosen his hold and let his master drag him away. Clarence sunk down on the lowest step to the store-piazza.

"Please get me some ammonia!" he gasped. "I feel—oh! so dreadful!—and I think I shall faint!"

A hearty slap on the back from the hand of a brawny old farmer almost knocked Clarence over.

"Brace up!" was the reply. "We haven't any use around here for men that faint. A pailful o' water poured over your head is what you need."

"Or a glass of whisky!" another man suggested.

"Loosen his stays," grimly advised a third. "Hit him with a club!" still more rudely uttered a fourth.

"Heartless wretches!" moaned Clarence, wringing his hands. "I think you are real mean. I guess you wouldn't laugh if a horrid bear should rudely seize you!"

"He's playin' off ter get a drink o' whisky." Even Clarence was not proof against all of these taunts, and he gathered himself up on his feet in indignation.

"I am not to be insulted," he averred. "Every man who has scoffed at me in my great peril shall henceforth be my enemy. I disdain to chastise him, but I know what I think of him. He is awful wicked and unfeeling!"

Clarence drew up his little form to its full height—five feet and five inches—and attempted to crush his companions with a look. The effort was a failure, but one good result followed—the sickly smile was for the time gone from his face.

"Allow me, gents," Eliab interrupted, "ter say a word in the case. I want ter apologize in the humblest way fur what my bear has done. I am shocked"—there was a merry twinkle in his eyes which he carefully kept from Piercey's notice—"positively shocked by his conduct. I shall punish him by givin' him a poor quality o' food fur a week ter come. Why, I never knowed Peter ter break out like this afore, an' I feel hurt—hurt *ba-a-d*!"

The last word was prolonged with ludicrous gravity, and Eliab wagged his head as though he felt all broken up over the occurrence.

"Cheer up, Clarry!" he added. "Nobody ain't goin' ter hurt ye while I'm around, an' that's flat. Why don't somebody bring that ammonia?"

"Thanks!" answered Clarence stiffly, for he had recovered from his fright, and felt ashamed as well as annoyed by the manifest contempt of the men; "thanks, but I will not trouble any one. The brute of a bear is still looking viciously at me, and I will depart."

He turned and walked quickly away. Lightfoot Peter had still been looking at him in a hostile way, and the fact was surprising. Never before since Eliab first took him on the road had the sagacious animal offered to molest any one.

"I'm afeard my quadruped has lost caste," observed Godown.

"He has done a good deed," quickly returned 'Si French. "Pity he did not eat up that little wretch. Some folks adore Clarence Piercey, but I don't. A man with a voice and grin like his, and such general silliness, ought to go for bear's-meat, were it not that it would be an outrage on the bear."

"You look at it too trivially," declared Mr.

Godown, mournfully. "I feel hurt that Peter should act so tarnation onruly, an' I reckon I'll take him back ter the barn an' talk sense to him. Sech lawless conduct is lamentable!"

He swung the bear around, though the fact that he showed no harshness in doing it might well have suggested the theory that he did not feel as bad over it as he pretended. The Three Innocents returned to their quarters in silence.

When they were in the barn, and the door closed, Whistling Jacob broke the spell.

"Eliab, I want to call on Clarence!" he announced.

"Eh?"

"Yes, I do."

"What in the world do you want o' him?"

"I want to look around *his* room."

"Why?"

"I may make discoveries."

"Speak plain, Petts!"

"Why did the bear attack him?"

"I'm a bit puzzled ter know."

"I am not. Eliab, that outbreak of an animal which we know to be as docile and good-natured as a kitten, is significant. He *knew* his man; and I'll bet several dollars that he was the same person that Peter hugged on the island last night!"

"I won't dispute ye, lad; but why?"

"Peter was standing there as peaceable as he ever was in his life, but the moment that he got sight of Piercey, his mood changed. He shot the man a hostile glance, and then went for him. Now, there was cause for this. He recognized by sight or by scent, some one he had cause to dislike. Yesterday, the dude stood here and delivered an oration, right in front of Peter, and the bear did not raise a finger, so to speak. Clearly, the cause of trouble came later. When, if not on the island, last night? Peter recognized the man with whom he had once before had a grapple, and was anxious to renew hostilities."

Eliab shook his head slowly.

"I won't dispute ye, Jacob Petts, fur my own opinions lie right alongside yours, but you add ter the weight we hev ter carry on our shoulders. Ef we admit that Clarry may hev been at the island, we must bar out Littleton an' Messenger."

"Do it!" quickly advised Jacob.

"But ef Clarry is a parson—"

"Don't apply the word to him! I've seen such men, and they are possessed of dignity, one and all. Piercey is a grinning, silly creature, who would disgrace the pulpit. He says he is a retired minister. I don't believe it. Well, call him by his name, and let the minister part go."

"All right, my lad. So you fix on Clarry?"

"I have faith in Peter's instinct."

"And no faith in Piercey?"

"Watch him, Eliab; watch him!"

"So we will. I wouldn't bet a red herrin' on him, myself. Yes, we'll watch him."

"Shall I go and call on him?"

"What excuse could ye make?"

"Say that you feel bad over the trouble, and hope the bear has done no serious damage."

"You kin try it."

This was enough for the younger detective. He arose and left the barn. He did not know where Clarence was to be found, but inquiry led to the information that he boarded at Mrs. Piper's, and Mrs. Piper's house was pointed out in the distance. He went there, and a ponderous old lady met him at the door.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but is Reverend Mr. Piercey in?" he blandly asked.

"No, my child, but I expect him every moment. Won't you come in and wait?"

Jacob thought he would, and did so.

"You're the boy that is with the bear, ain't you?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"You do well to come to dear Mr. Piercey for advice."

"I suppose he is a very good man?"

"Good!" echoed the old lady, looking up at the ceiling in profound emotion. "Young man, words can't begin to express it. Mr. Piercey is lovely!"

"He doesn't preach, I believe?"

"No. His vocal organs are not strong, and he has been ordered to do no preaching for a few years."

"Let me see—did he once preach in Templeton?"

"I don't know; but he never mentioned preaching anywhere but down in Maine."

It occurred to Jacob that Piercey had fixed the point well away from Birdseye, for prudential reasons.

"How does he support himself?"

"Oh! he is a man of some financial means—a lovely man!"

"Being so popular, he must get a good many letters?"

"Well, not—not so very many," Mrs. Piper replied meditatively. "He has cousins in New York who write often. It is a large family, for a good many persons write from there to him. There is one letter for him now."

She pointed to the article named, which was on a shelf beside the big old-fashioned clock.

"That's a small, neat stamp they use in New York for the post-mark," observed the visitor. "May I look at it closer?"

"Dear heart, yes!"

The young detective arose and looked. He was not working without an object. Whoever was the bank-robbers' agent at Birdseye must hear from them often, and the letter found in the coat would not naturally be the only one. The boy had "fished" for information, and had received it promptly. Learning that Piercey often heard from his cousins (?) in New York, and that one missive was even then awaiting him, Jacob was eager to see the superscriptions.

He looked, and another discovery was made.

It was the same writing seen in the "X Y Z" letter, and on the envelope secured from Ralph Littleton.

Truly matters were becoming warm.

"Do you think of asking dear Mr. Piercey's help in business?" came Mrs. Piper's voice. "I think he would do it for you. He is a lovely man!"

The visitor was aware that he made some reply, but his mind was not on the subject. He was trying to settle one point which perplexed him. It had been said in his hearing that Piercey and Littleton were rivals for the hand of Direxa Sherwin, and that there was no love between them. Late discoveries seemed to connect them with each other, in other ways, as allies. Unless there were two handwritings wonderfully alike, the writer of the "X Y Z" letter had lately written to both Ralph and Piercey.

Could it be that the men were allies—that their rivalry for Direxa's hand was only a cunning, unfeeling artifice to hide their alliance in crime, by making it seem that they were not on friendly terms?

Jacob disliked to believe it.

It was very hard to think that Ralph would be in any enterprise, honest or not, with such a man as Piercey.

However that was, the detective had made a discovery of vast importance by learning that an unopened letter from the New York agent of the criminals awaited the so-called minister.

Jacob would not admit the possibility of doubt on that point, and he felt that his excuse of looking at the post-mark had borne good fruit.

He sat down with the intention of asking more questions, and unsuspecting Mrs. Piper was as ready as a sieve to let out information, but there was an interruption to this little investigation.

A voice sounded near the door with the question:

"Is Reverend Clarence Piercey in?"

CHAPTER XII.

JACOB "ENLISTS FOR THE WAR."

A MAN stood at the door whom Jacob had never seen before, and Mrs. Piper's manner soon showed that he was a stranger to her.

"His Reverence is out, just now," she said, replying to the question.

"He lives here, don't he?" continued the man.

"Yes, sir."

"Will he return soon?"

"I expect him every moment."

"Then, with your leave, I'll wait."

"Certainly, sir; sit down. I presume you know him?"

"A good deal better than you do, madam!"

Jacob could not help regarding this reply as significant, as he looked at the caller. That person had accepted the invitation and sat down. He was a young man whose sober, very respectable dress did not hide a certain rakish air. He had a small, straw-colored mustache, the ends of which were turned upward, and, on the whole, he presented a strong contrast to Clarence Piercey. An expert would have said of him: "A city man, and wide-awake all through!"

He deposited himself easily in the chair.

"Is Piercey busy now?" he asked.

"Not particularly, I think."

"Does he preach much?"

"No, sir: his bronchial tubes are so bad that he is resting from all arduous duties."

"Is it so bad as that? I was in hopes to hear him before I went back. His eloquence, logic

and piety always give me new ideas. That man is bound to make his mark in the world, madam!"

"He is a lovely man!" deposed Mrs. Piper.

"True and noble!"

"We all love him here!"

"You have cause. Among those who know him best he is regarded as very useful. I do not know a better person to raise money when a great cause is concerned."

Was it fancy, or did Jacob see a sly twinkle in the rakish stranger's eyes.

"Attendance at our Ladies' Missionary meetings has increased one-half since he began to attend," explained Mrs. Piper.

"He always was popular, and raising money for the heathen was his favorite occupation. You can give charge of your finances to no better person than Piercey, if your object is to have a balance on the right side. He is devoted to the heathen, and when he gets money he knows what to do with it!"

The young detective listened breathlessly. Grave as the speaker's manner was, Jacob believed there was double meaning in all that he said; and that the "heathen" referred to were the members of the robber band. But Mrs. Piper had no such idea.

"He is a lovely man!" she declared.

Jacob was disgusted. Such hero-worship would have been bad enough under any condition, but if, as unsuspected, Piercey was a fraud, it was criminal. Shallow-headed Mrs. Piper, however, had no doubts.

It was the decree of fate that, at that juncture, a boy should appear and say that Mrs. Piper was wanted for a few minutes at the house of a neighbor. The good woman's confidence in human nature, and in honesty, was shown to be strong when she requested her visitors to "keep house" while she was gone, and left them in possession.

The stranger immediately assumed an easier position and looked critically at Jacob.

"You're not her son!" he observed.

"How do you know?" our young detective asked.

"Leghorn hens are never mother to eagles!"

"You don't compliment Mrs. Piper much, but you are right in your opinion. I'm not her son."

"Neighbor?"

"Just now, yes."

"I fancy you don't live in Birdseye."

"I do not."

"Noted the people as I came along, and was surprised to see the amount of hayseed in their hair!"

The speaker threw one leg over the back of a convenient chair and drew a cigar out of his pocket.

"While the cat's away the mice will play," he added. "Will you smoke, young feller?"

"No, thank you."

"I will. Smoking, my lad, is one of my failings. Some persons decry the habit, and it does take money, and may not be healthy; but the point is right here—I like to smoke, and I'm going to do it. If I didn't smoke, I could get rich. It costs me a dollar a day; three hundred and sixty-five dollars a year; three thousand, six hundred and fifty dollars every ten years; and if I should smoke one hundred years, as I possibly shall, it would roll up the tidy sum of thirty-six thousand, five hundred dollars. That would be a right smart stock of green silks, alias greenbacks."

These words were uttered flippantly. The stranger had his cigar in full blast, and was lolling back in his chair and looking meditatively at the ceiling.

His mathematical calculation did not interest Jacob, but the way that he wound up *did*. For the third time the youth had heard the peculiar expression "green silks." He had seen the circulars which counterfeiters had before then sent out to their victims, in which the term "green goods" was used; but had first happened on "green silks" when Lightfoot Peter secured the "X Y Z" letter.

The rakish stranger began to have a deep interest for young Mr. Petts.

"I don't think Mr. Piercey smokes," he remarked.

"Don't you?"

"I have never seen him."

"Ministers rarely do."

"Mr. Piercey must be a very good man," was the wily reply.

"Oh! he's a darling! If any one was ever born free from guile, it was our Clarence."

"Every one here thinks very highly of him."

"They don't begin to know him yet."

"He must be real smart."

"He's got his brilliant streaks, and one of them is to pull the wool over the eyes of the wicked. Take, for instance, the case of some man who is rich, penurious and flinty-hearted. Upon such a person Clarence is as effective as a mustard-plaster. Knowing that the heathen in Africa and elsewhere need money, Clarence will lay himself out, and the first thing our miser knows, he is minus a pile of green silks."

"That's about what I thought," modestly answered Jacob. "Do you remain long in Birdseye, sir?"

"Only until to-morrow."

It flashed upon Jacob that the stolen money was to arrive at Birdseye that night, but he kept his face as grave as possible and went on with the conversation. Several times he tried as much as he dared to get indiscreet remarks from the stranger—he gave his name as Merdell—but, though the latter was flippant, and made a few suggestive remarks, he did not betray himself to any great extent. It was clear, however, that he was a very "fly" young man, and not the kind of a friend a real minister would select.

Mrs. Piper soon returned. Jacob remained long enough to hear her twice assert that Mr. Piercey was "a lovely man," and then, as the object of her idolatry did not return, the detective decided not to remain any longer.

He was anxious to see Eliab and tell him the latest news.

He left the house, but was not destined to go back to his ally at once. On the way he encountered Ralph Littleton.

"Are you busy?" the latter asked.

"No, sir."

"Do you want a job?"

"You bet!"

"Then, if you will go over to the island, I will find use for you. What do you say?"

It did not take Jacob long to decide. He did not know what Littleton intended to do at the island, but the prospect of witnessing whatever might occur made him feel like dancing for joy. Too wise to exhibit his exhilaration, he answered with assumed carelessness:

"All right, sir. I am not busy, and I'd just as soon go as not. I'll enlist for the war, so to speak!"

"Come ahead, then. I have one of Sowders's boats engaged, and will not this time vex Mr. Sherwin by appropriating his."

"Wasn't he a bit hasty yesterday?"

"Man never deserved censure less than I did. I can't well say more, but you will remember that I had companions. If they had no right to the boat, who had?"

Jacob found himself growing more and more a partisan of young Littleton, and he expressed his sympathy. They reached the pond; Ralph unlocked one of Sowders's boats; they entered and pulled away to the island.

As before, Ralph landed at the northern end, and they were soon ascending the knoll. At one thicket the leader paused, ran his hand inside and brought out his spade. The long, slender rope, or cord, was still tied to it.

"That's a queer combination," Jacob announced.

"You shall soon see the result of it. I had to dispose of it hastily the other day, when Sherwin made matters so warm for me."

"Have you been here since?" the detective carelessly asked.

"No."

"I didn't know but you would come over to see if the hut had been molested."

"The place is of but little consequence. I have had occasion to be here considerable, and may continue to do so, and I put up the hut. It was, however, done more for idle sport than real use, though I have found it useful, several times, when a sudden shower came up."

By that time they had reached the place where Ralph had once planted his spade in the ground for some unknown person. Now he seemed to be in no hurry. He sat down upon the fallen tree, drew from his pocket what looked to be the same paper Jacob had seen him have before, and began studying it anew.

What could be his secret?

He finally arose and removed his coat.

"I shall have to strip to it somewhat," he remarked, "for the work is hard on a fellow's garments. I had an old coat which I kept here, but some prowler stole it a few days ago, so I am minus."

Jacob's eyes sparkled.

"Was it a coarse, gray coat?" he asked.

"It was neither. To be exact, it was nearly black, and of tolerably fine material; was cut in 'frock' pattern, and was not ill-looking in its day."

This description, as far as it went, applied

very well to the coat Lightfoot Peter had confiscated, and Jacob would have exonerated his companion had he not remembered the tell-tale envelope.

Ralph tossed him one end of the rope, and added:

"Now, then, be so good as to stand exactly where I planted my spade yesterday, and hold one end of that cord while I proceed to the next stage of affairs!"

CHAPTER XIII.

DUG UP FROM THE DEPTHS.

JACOB obeyed these directions to the letter, and Littleton took the loose end of the cord and paced away about thirty yards to the south. He then called his assistant and bade him stand where his leader had stopped. Next, Ralph measured several yards to the left, and brought up at a pine tree.

"Struck it, the first time!" Jacob heard him mutter.

The detective's curiosity could be curbed no longer.

"Say, is there buried treasure here?" he asked.

"Not to my knowledge."

"You ain't a surveyor?"

"I am, just at present."

"Going to lay out a town here?"

"There is something buried," answered Ralph, gravely, "but it is a more serious matter than treasure would be. Wait patiently, and you shall see the result."

Working steadily, the speaker measured back, to and past Jacob, and at a distance of a few yards paused. He gathered up the rope, and flung it over an adjacent limb. Next, he ordered the spade brought, and drove it into the ground where he stood.

"Another step gained!" he announced. "Don't think me insane, my lad, but take a look at this paper!"

Once more he produced the article named. It was a queer, but not a complicated affair. The most prominent thing about it was a figure made by means of two straight lines. These intersected in such a way as to form an imperfect letter "T," one-half of the cross-line being longer than the other. Beside of the longer mark was the number "90." One-half of the cross-line was labeled "85," and the other "30." At the extreme end of the shorter portion was a small cross, and at the bottom of all were two words in writing—"Dig there!"

"I suppose you'll do it?" mechanically asked Jacob, who was a good deal excited.

"Most certainly. You see, I have been a long time in locating this spot. My first directions were: 'Find a big tree, in the south side of the trunk of which is a deep double-cut in the form of a cross,' and then I was directed to measure away from it as you have seen me do. I searched long and carefully. Big trees were abundant, but upon none could I find the double-cut in the shape of a cross, and it was not until I had the clew from Miss Direxa Sherwin that I got any start. She came over and located the tree. I had feared that the passage of years had caused the cross to become over-grown and obliterated, but she remembered seeing it. The cross was on yonder fallen tree."

Ralph had taken up the spade, and he began to dig lustily.

The soil was soft and somewhat damp.

"If anything but metal was buried there, it stands a poor show of being there now," observed the detective.

"We shall find something—enough to shock at least one of us."

The words were spoken gloomily, and the detective began to experience considerable uneasiness. What did Littleton expect to exhumed?

The man worked well; in fact, he showed a nervous energy which indicated a mind ill at ease. Could it be possible that a human being rested there? Jacob had an unpleasant suspicion that such might be the case, but it did not seem likely. If it was so, some crime was likely to have existence with it. The dark, somber knoll was not the place any sane person would choose for a last resting-place.

Larger grew the excavation. Once, Ralph paused to rest, and his companion volunteered to relieve him, but the offer was not accepted. The work went on until the worker stood knee-deep in the pit, which, curiously enough, he was making oblong, much like a grave.

Discoveries began at last.

He cast up a spadeful of earth; it struck near Jacob's feet, broke and rolled apart in fine fragments.

The boy uttered a startled exclamation, and Ralph looked up.

"What is it?" he asked.

Jacob silently pointed. At his feet lay a fragment of bone, and it needed no close survey to show that it was a joint—all that remained of a larger piece. Ralph's face lost color perceptibly, and he muttered:

"Time's hand has fallen heavily. At all events, it proves that I am on the right track. Boy, this bone was once part of a human being, like you and me. The sight is not pleasant, but inexorable duty drives me on. You can retire to a distance, if you wish."

He plunged his spade into the earth again, but his ally did not retire. Unpleasant though the scene was, it had a fascination, and Jacob, in his official capacity, ought to see all that was to be seen.

Luckily, there were but few more fragments of mortality. Time and the damp earth had done their work well. But a second discovery was at hand.

The spade struck some other object, and, as Ralph seemed to suspect what it was, he dug around it carefully until a surface a foot square was revealed. He lifted it; the damp, clinging earth fell away, and something like a box remained in his possession. He stepped out of the pit.

"Our work is done!" he announced.

"What in the world have you there?"

"That for which I dug."

"Looks like a box."

"It is."

The speaker gazed at the object for a moment in silence, and then put it down carefully.

"I will first restore this sepulcher of the dead to its former condition," he added.

He did so, putting back the pieces of bone, but the work had but little interest for Jacob. He was looking at the box, and wondering what secrets it held. Its weight showed that it could not be filled with coins, and the idea of treasure was not to be entertained. What, then, was there? If any papers had been buried, he doubted that they had withstood the effects of time. Had the box been found only to be proved valueless?

Ralph completed his work, and spread refuse matter over it until he had effaced, as far as possible, all signs of the excavation. He then lifted the box again. He seemed to forget his companion entirely, and started off at a brisk walk, but Jacob was not to be gotten rid of like that. He followed, and was led to the hut.

They entered, and Littleton at once took a stone and struck against the side of the box. Some sort of fastening was there, but it gave way at once, and the cover sprung up partially. Ralph raised it entirely.

The interior was completely filled with a compact package which, Jacob thought, was oiled silk. His curiosity had never been greater than then, but it was doomed to disappointment. With the fascinating, perplexing secret almost in his own grasp, all hope of learning it was cut off. Ralph felt of the package, appeared satisfied, and then suddenly closed the box again.

"It will wait," he said, laconically.

"Ain't you going to look at it now?" asked Jacob, his face falling.

"Not until I reach my room."

"What is it, anyhow?" was the blunt question.

"I don't know, exactly."

"You've got a pretty close idea."

"So I have, but it will wait, as I said before. If it is good for anything, it is too good to open anywhere except in the privacy of my own room. I must say that I am agreeably surprised to get it. It has seemed only a forlorn hope, but the importance of the affair has led me to persevere. I am glad now that I did."

"What's its value in dollars and cents?" plainly demanded the boy, who was not in the best of humor.

"Not one penny!"

"Then what do you want it for?"

"There is more in this world than money, boy; a good deal more. Powerful as money is, it will not do all things, or give a contented mind. Now, may I ask you to keep this day's work an entire secret? There are men I would not willingly have know of it."

"Clarence Piercy, for instance."

"Why do you mention him?"

"He bears you no good will."

"Right, though why he has such a spite I don't know."

"He likes Direxa Sherwin—"

"That does not fully explain it. Before I ever saw Miss Sherwin, Piercy had betrayed his ill will. For some strange reason he disliked me at the start, and I think he would

gladly do me mischief. I place but little confidence in his professions of goodness; by word and glance he has betrayed a state of mind nothing short of hatred. I doubt the man, and it may be laid down as a safe rule to never trust any man with a flat, die-away voice, and a silly smile constantly upon his face."

"Just my idea!" Jacob agreed. "Furthermore, I believe you do well to be suspicious of Piercy."

"I am not afraid of him."

"Suppose he puts up some job on you?"

"That is possible."

The detective looked Ralph full in the face, and continued:

"He might even send you a letter which would lay a trap for your feet!"

Littleton started. Jacob had spoken with a clear idea in mind, but his companion did not suspect the fact. But if the start, and the thoughtful look which followed, furnished any criterion, a train of meditation was aroused in the young man's mind which was not insignificant.

"Certainly, certainly!" was the reply, after brief hesitation. "Well, let us go back now; I have no more to say!"

He was evidently determined not to make any confidences, and Jacob urged him no further. After secreting the spade, they went to the boat, and were soon homeward bound. Ralph's mind was busy, and he worked the oars and showed no disposition to talk. Jacob humored him, and the trip was made in total silence. When they landed, however, the young man gave his ally a dollar, spoke pleasantly to him, and expressed the hope that they would meet again.

Then, with his box under his arm, he walked away.

Jacob looked after him regretfully.

"I'd give this dollar back, and a good many more on top of it, to be in his room when the box is opened. Still, it can't be that the concern, buried as it has been for probably twenty years, can have any connection with the bank robbery of a few days ago; and I suppose I should merely be a meddler without good cause if I looked into this matter further just now."

Acting upon this idea he hastened back to the barn, anxious to see Eliab.

The barn was empty, as far as Eliab and his bear were concerned, but in a conspicuous place was the following painfully-spelled notice:

"RASLIN' GACUB:—I have gon two giv the baer a lit'l 'xercise, But Wil Be Back soon. wate untill i cum, if U ain't in two moutch hurrie. Ewers trullie, "EELLY ABB GODDOWN."

Jacob had to smile. Eliab Godown, despite the crude way in which he talked, could write and spell correctly when he wished. When he wished otherwise, he made an equal success of bad spelling.

CHAPTER XIV.

JARED TALKS OF SPECULATION.

THE young detective did not have long to wait, for Eliab soon made his appearance. He at once began talking in a shrill voice.

"So you're here, youngster? Well, I'm glad on't, for I want to ask your advice. Lightfoot Peter don't get no better o' his lameness, an' he actually limped considerable as we was a-comin' home. I'm afeerd he has got rheumatism in that shoulder, an' it may be t'arnal bard ter drive out. My great-uncle, Peletiah Godown, had rheumatism so bad that he went lame when he tried ter feed hisself. It was all through his system, an' when he had a tooth pulled, it staggered an' limped!"

This information was rattled off volubly and in the little old man's usual happy way, but Lightfoot Peter received no sympathy. The fiction of his lameness was an old one.

Eliab suddenly sat down and demanded:

"How's things?"

"Flourishing!"

"I b'lieve you. The pot is gettin' b'lin' hot."

"How so?"

"I've seen a familiar face."

"Whose?"

"Hickory Jim's. You may not know him, but I do. He is a rogue who has, by good luck, escaped gettin' up a world-wide reputation, but he's none the less dangerous. He's in Birdseye, an' ef I read the signs right, it means that the bank-money, stole by the gang, is here, or about ter come. Very likely, Hickory Jim is herc as an advance guard, as it were."

"Where did you see him?"

"Met him in the street half an hour ago. He went ter the hotel, but is sailin' low; a more harmless-actin' duck you couldn't find."

"Describe him!"

Eliab did so.

"Was any one with him?" Jacob added.

"No."

"Well, the man has a friend here, as I happen to know, and he called upon the friend before he went to the hotel. Are you sure he is Hickory Jim?"

"I be."

"Then I know the Birdseye agent of the robbers."

"Who is he?"

"Clarence Piercely!"

Eliab whistled softly.

"Your Jim's first move was to call upon Piercely," added the young detective. "I was there, saw him and talked with him; and I spotted him at once as a man no better than the law allows. I thought then as you think now, but, as long as you know him, it adds proof to suspicion."

"Did he have any package with him?"

"No."

"Then the boodle ain't come. Ef there is coin in it, ez we hev been tol', it can't be carried around in the pocket like a toothpick. The crisis is nigh, an' we hev our man spotted. We will discard Littleton, myster'us as he is, an' hold Messenger on suspicion, but as fer Clarry Piercely—well, we drop on his racket an' see him one better. You said all along that a man with a baby voice an' a silly grin was not to be trusted, an' you had it solid. Clarry is our pie-plant, an' we will serve him up hot. In my opinlon, Petts, the stolen boodle comes ter town ter-night, an' we must be on the watch. Probably it will be kerried ter Clarry's room, ter be housed until the robbers think safe ter sarculate it."

"No doubt."

"I s'pose we must see the local officers."

"Yes."

"I hate ter, like p'ison. You know my fail-in, Jacob; I like ter have only *reg'lars* inter my games. These country officers are an artom thick headed. They find it hard ter believe that a homely old critter who goes cipherin' 'round the back lots with a brown bear is a mighty detective in disguise, an' they hate ter yield obedience."

"Suppose we leave them alone?"

"An' miss our quarry."

"Not so. Let's enlist Ralph Littleton, and the three of us are enough to 'do up' the heathen—with Lightfoot Peter's help. You've not heard all my story; let me go on."

He told what had occurred at the island, and then resumed his suggestion that Littleton be added to their party, but Eliab would not consent. It was all very well to think the young man worthy of confidence, and Godown did not object to this theory, but when it came to trusting him with important secrets, it was a very different matter. Good or evil, he was hemmed in with secrets, himself, and such a man might well be handled gingerly until he was proved worthy of confidence.

Jacob did not object to this decision, and Littleton was left out of the plan for the future.

Eliab was anxious to see what was transpiring in the village. The natural inference was that Merdell, or, rather, Hickory Jim, was the only one of the burglar band in Birdseye, with the exception of the regular agent; but this was by no means a positive fact—there might be more. Actuated by this knowledge, Eliab determined to go out and have an eye on local affairs.

Once more The Three Innocents went forth. Deeming it advisable to enter the village from a new point, and not make too conspicuous the fact that they were taking life very easy for alleged poor men, they decided to go down the road past Jared Sherwin's house, and then bear around and enter the main street at the lower end.

They went accordingly.

When they neared Jared's place they had a chance to see why Clarence Piercely had not been found at home. He and Jared stood on the piazza, talking earnestly.

"We'll stop!" Eliab announced. "As you hev been ter see him, it will clear away possible suspicion ef we stop now an' palaver Clarry."

This plan was wise, and when they reached the house they paused. They remained at the edge of the road. Piercely was seen to give them one glance, but if he had any privacy, he apparently considered the Innocents unworthy of notice.

"I advise against it, dear sir," he was saying.

"At your age, it is indiscreet."

"There ain't any good reason why I shouldn't make money, as well as a younger man," answered Sherwin. "True, I have no son to leave it to, but I like money, myself."

"But speculation is risky," Piercely argued.

"I shall look into it before I invest."

"But will you be satisfied without a home?"

"The speculation will soon make me another, a good deal finer than this."

"Yet, it will not be the old homestead. How long have you resided on this farm, and in this house?"

"I was born here."

"Ah! ah! Then it must have a wondrous hold upon you, dear Mr. Sherwin. When one has so long lived at a place, and grown old while thus living, the tendrils of love reach out and twine around his heart as the vine clings to the stately oak. 'Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home!' To me there is nothing sweeter than life, nothing dearer, tenderer or more pathetic, than this same attachment of an aged man for his ancestral home. When he goes out, the lilies of the field welcome him as an old friend, and he looks upon them, and a great peace is upon him. Ah! ah! Sweet is home!"

And Clarence uplifted his hands, and looked touchingly at the roof of the piazza.

"So is money sweet!" grimly answered Sherwin.

"Its love is the root of all evil."

"I'll take my chances."

"Think seriously before you act. Do not deprive yourself of a home in old age for any trifling return. Home! Oh! blessed world! I seem, dear Mr. Sherwin, to look back to my own childhood's paradise. I see my good parents; my dear little brother, Guy; my sweet little sister, Pansy; I see the big dog, Freddie—and, ah! I see a pet gained-fowl that we called Dickie. I wish I had Dickie, now, to fold to my bosom as I did in my childhood's happy hours!"

Clarence folded his arms, as though, in fancy, he had the fowl then, while Eliab Godown muttered:

"Fan me with a brick!—I feel pooty weak an' tired!"

"Sentiment isn't business!" Sherwin returned, doggedly. "Unless I change my mind, I shall sell out. Of course, as these parties, who offer me a chance to speculate, are strangers, I shall not act hastily, but I think I shall invest."

"Of course you will use your own judgment. I know but little about worldly business, while you are a shrewd man of long business experience. I do not assume to set my judgment up in opposition to yours, but it seems a pity to sell the dear old homestead. Well, I will leave you now, but will drop around again soon."

He received a cordial invitation to do so, and then started away. He smiled beamingly upon The Three Innocents.

"Peace be upon you, dear friends," he said, blandly.

"Sir, we thank ye right hearty," answered Eliab, humbly, "an' it's right good in ye, arter the imperliteness ter you that Lightfoot Peter did."

"Do not mention it. I was foolish to be so disturbed by the event, but my arduous professional labors have seriously disarranged my poor, poor nerves!"

"The bear was monstrous rude."

"Only playful, dear friend—only playful."

"Then you don't lay up nothin' ag'in' us?"

"Not a thing."

"It's right good in ye, I do declare! I've been thinkin' on't, an' as I thought ye had good cause ter be put out, I sent my boy, Jacob here, around ter your house ter offer our perlitest apology. You wa'n't in, but the apology is made now."

"I wish I had been there to greet the dear little boy, but perhaps he will call again. I should be glad to see both of you. Believe me, I bear you only love and good will."

Very blandly Mr. Piercely spoke, but he kept a wary eye upon Lightfoot Peter, and did not seem disposed to linger. He made a few more remarks, and then walked toward the north. The Three Innocents went in the opposite direction.

"More villainy afoot!" growled Eliab.

"How so?"

"Did ye hear the talk about Sherwin sellin' his farm an' puttin' his money inter speculation?"

"Yes."

"The gang has got arter him. There is some swindle, an' the allies of Piercely hev marked Sherwin as a victim."

"But Piercely advised against it."

"He did, mildly. I kin plainly see why. He is goin' ter stay here awhile, he bein' the man who is ter house the stolen money until the thieves think they can safely pass it, an' he ain't goin' ter draw suspicion or ill-will ter himself

by plainly advisin' Sherwin ter go inter the wild-cat scheme. He's too shrewd fur that, but it is probable that the gang hev got the old gent well on the hook, an' think they will land the fish anyhow."

"Will they, Eliab?"

"I should smile! All the fish they land here wouldn't feed much of a multitude. The Three Innocents hev got an eye open, an' I fancy thar will be a smash here soon. We want ter score another big scoop, an' we're goin' ter do it!"

CHAPTER XV.

HOW THE GRAVE WAS FILLED.

THE detective trio had just reached the south end of the main street, near the depot, when they saw Ralph Littleton walking rapidly toward them. The same idea at once occurred to both Eliab and Jacob. Ralph was unusually well-dressed, and carried a small hand-bag. It was nearly time for the south-bound train, and it looked very much as though he was about to leave town.

"He's excited!" Jacob observed. "I'll bet that he found the contents of the box rather startling."

"Question him!"

Mr. Godown had time to give no further directions, for Ralph was at hand. The latter, however, did not wait for them to open conversation. He addressed Jacob abruptly:

"Boy, what has become of that envelope I gave you?" he demanded.

His manner had no touch of hostility, but it was a hard question to answer.

"You gave me the envelope to take to the store," Jacob returned.

"So I did, but you did not leave it there; you gave the order orally for the things I wanted. What became of the envelope?"

"He tore up a lot o' old paper," put in Eliab, glibly. "It may be that one was among them."

"That envelope was important."

"Then why didn't you keep it when you had it?"

"I did not realize its value then."

"Will its loss do you any harm?"

"No; but its possession might do a good deal of good. To tell the truth, I want it to try and nab a rascal."

Jacob looked at Eliab in silence.

"Littleton," the detective leader spoke, "kin you prove ter us that you are an honest man?"

"I can convince you beyond doubt, by means of papers I have at my room, or, if any one doubts it, he can telegraph to the Mayor of New York City. That gentleman is a personal friend of my late father; has known me all my life; and I am willing to submit my character to him, and rise or fall according to how his verdict goes!"

Ralph spoke with worthy pride—not the kind common to shallow minds; but that of an honest man who resents any slight cast upon his honor. Eliab was looking at him keenly, trying to read him through and through, and the impression was very favorable.

"May I ask," he mildly returned, "why you're goin' away?"

"I cannot tell that."

"I can guess. Partly on account o' that letter, an' partly because o' what you found in the box, you're goin' fur a detective!"

The statement was a surmise, pure and simple, but the shot had been well sped. Ralph looked at the speaker in surprise.

"Perhaps you can tell me where to find a detective," he observed, somewhat ironically.

"I can."

"Where?"

"Do you really want one?"

"Yes."

"Convince me o' that fack, an' you shall have him right soon, my frien'."

Eliab spoke confidently, but Ralph looked at him in considerable bewilderment. Ordinarily he would have wondered why in the name of common sense he held any conversation on such a subject with a little old man who went roaming about the country with a dancing bear, but he had been influenced both strangely and strongly by the detective pair. He stood and stared at Godown until a loud puffing revealed one fact—while he had stood in idleness, the train had reached the depot and was just starting away.

"Too late!" he muttered, irritably.

"That's a fack. Better take us to your room, young man."

Somehow, Eliab had grown keener and more intelligent of appearance than before, in Ralph's eyes, and though the question seemed superlatively foolish to him, he impulsively asked:

"Are you a detective?"

"Ef not, I'll show ye one when I git ter your room."

Ralph gave one regretful look at the fast-departing train, and then turned submissively.

"Do with me as you will," he directed.

"Jacob, take the bear ter his quarters, an' then come ter me," Eliab added.

The die was cast, and the two men walked back together. Ralph felt half-angry with himself for being led into serious association with his humble-looking companion, but, as long as he had missed the train, he determined to carry the matter to an end, and either have some satisfaction or prove Godown a fraud.

When they reached his room they settled down at once, and Eliab asked for proofs that Littleton was an honest man. They came promptly, in the form of letters and recommendations from prominent men. In some cases the writing was familiar to Eliab, and he was not long in being convinced. When this point was reached he made a revelation in return, and placed before his companion ample proof that he was a detective.

He had expected that he would have to lead the way with further confidence, but, when Ralph had recovered from his bewilderment, he said:

"I should as soon have expected to find a detective in some old farmer here, but am now prepared to believe that some detectives are to be found in strange disguises. More than that, I have a case for you."

"Probably I'll take it," Godown answered.

Ralph opened his traveling-bag. The first thing that Eliab saw was the oiled-silk, but the younger man gave that only brief attention. From the interior of the bag he produced a tin box, small and dingy, and opened it. The only thing inside was a paper. It needed no explanation to tell the detective that all these things had come from the larger tin box, excavated from the island-knoll, but, despite the size of the wrappings, he was surprised to find the paper in such good condition.

His companion spread it out and briefly directed:

"Read!"

Dim and faded was the ink, but it was still easy to read.

"JUNE 11, 1853.

"I, Ethan A. Littleton, native and resident of New York City, being now at the point of death, do make the following statement, and solemnly swear that it is true in every particular:

"My business has been that of a speculator in cattle, I going out into the country, in various directions, to buy animals, which afterwards I would ship to market. Two days ago I came to the town of Birdseye, and began to look around for bargains, having at that time a considerable sum of money in my possession. I soon made the acquaintance of a man who called himself Fernando Emmets. I can tell no more about him, except that he claimed to be in the same business as myself. I now believe that he was a liar, as he has proved himself a villain and a murderer.

"He decoyed me to this lonely hill, where my body will be found, and then fell upon me with assassin hands. I know not what his original purpose was, further than to rob me, but this is what happened: His first blow, struck with a heavy club, felled me to my knees. I struggled, but he had all the advantage, and showered blows upon my head until I lost consciousness.

"When I recovered he was gone, and my money had gone with him. I realized that he had deliberately lured me here for the purpose. I tried to shout for help; my voice was too feeble to be heard ten rods away. I tried to crawl away; my lower limbs and spine refused to obey me; I was partially paralyzed. Unless some one comes speedily I shall die without seeing any one to whom I can tell my story, so I am now writing it.

"I ask the Christian beings who find my remains to at once send word to my brother, Harper S. Littleton, Wall street, New York. I can write no more. I would add a description of Emmets, but my strength fails. They saw him at the hotel.

"ETHAN A. LITTLETON."

The signature was a mere scrawl, indicating that it had been made with the dying man's last strength.

Ralph took up the narrative:

"He was my uncle; the Harper Littleton mentioned was my father, now deceased. My uncle disappeared mysteriously, at about the time of my birth. He was searched for long and carefully, but never found. Naturally, my father and the detective he employed could arrive at only one conclusion—that there had been foul play—but all efforts to learn just when, or where, he disappeared, were vain.

"No light was ever gained until a few months ago, when a criminal named Alf Varney died. He made a confession in which he stated that, in June, 1853, he had acted as accessory to one 'Meek Moses,' another criminal, in the murder

of a cattleman near Birdseye. My uncle, you will notice, does not mention more than one man, so I do not know just what part Varney took, though he was not present at the murder.

"It seems that, after finishing the letter, my uncle expired. Varney was the one who found him. According to his story, which I believe, he had entertained no suspicion that murder was to be done when he agreed to aid 'Meek Moses.' Hearing from the latter how my uncle had been left, Varney crept back to the place. My uncle was dead.

"Varney was terrified by the probability of exposure, and he went back and secured a spade and then buried the body. He found the written paper you now hold, and some strange impulse led him to preserve it. He had with him two tin boxes; one his lunch-box and the other a match-box—those boxes you can now see on the table—and he prepared the whole as I afterward found it, and added it to the contents of the grave. Then, when it was refilled and all tell-tale signs obliterated, he marked a cross on a large tree, made sundry measurements to locate the grave, put them down so that he would not forget, and fled.

"Such was the story he told before his death. My father had passed to the unknown land, and only I was left to investigate. I came here as soon as possible. Varney had left no account of where the body was buried, except that it was near a large, cross-marked tree, distant a certain number of feet, as indicated by the map he had made at the time, and always possessed; while my uncle had referred to the locality only as 'this lovely hill.' Look around and see the many hills near this village, and you will gain some idea of how hard a task I have had here. After a while I settled upon the island—in my uncle's day the reservoir had not been constructed, and only a fish-brook lay between here and the knoll—but the marked tree had fallen, and I could not locate it until one who remembered having seen the cross in the past gave me the clew.

"The story is told."

Littleton ceased speaking and, leaning back in his chair, looked anxiously at Eliab.

He had had an attentive listener; not a word had been lost. This applied not only to Eliab, but to Jacob, who had entered softly.

"I hev reason ter believe," the detective remarked, "that you can never revenge your uncle, but some one else has been more fortunate."

"Who?"

"The helpers o' Judge Lynch. 'Meek Moses' was hung by a mob, ten years ago!"

CHAPTER XVI.

"HONOR AMONG THIEVES" NOT HIS MOTTO.

"YOU knew him, then!" Ralph exclaimed.

"I knowed of him. He was a big 'un, who had tried his luck at all sorts of villainy. He died a miserable death, an' I guess, from all reports, that he might hev envied the man hung by process of law—the lynchers hated him, an' giv him a cold deal."

"It seems, then, that my discovery is too late for use."

"Yes."

"Why was he called 'Meek Moses'?"

"Because he was the biggest hypocrite that ever walked. All sorts o' crime was at his door, but he invariably acted as bland, gentle, an' meek as the Moses of old. He disgraced religion by pretendin' ter be pious, sung hymns like a Methodist revivaler, an' was a veritable sheep in wolf's clothes."

"Just like Clarence Piercy," suggested Jacob.

"Ef?" cried Eliab, with a start.

Jacob repeated his statement, but the elder detective did not answer. He sat in silence, his face gravely thoughtful.

"Now," continued Ralph, "I have spoken very frankly to you, and would like some confidence in return."

"What d'ye want ter know?"

"You are not here without an object."

"That's a fact."

"What is it?"

Eliab hesitated. He had decided that Ralph was trustworthy, and hoped to secure his aid, but it was going a good ways to make a full confession.

"The fact that you go around with a dancing bear as a shield to your plans shows you to be a deep one," Littleton added, "and I am sure you have work to do at Birdseye. If I can help you, command me."

"We accept your offer. Now, how about the envelope you want ter get back? Why do you think it important?"

"Inclosed in it was a letter in which I am in-

vited to become the agent of counterfeiters, and the sender asked leave to place bogus coin in my possession, for me to pass—you shall see it soon—it is out of the ordinary run. It is not a trap for an unwary, but a glittering bribe to a dishonest man."

"Why do you argy?"

"A moment ago our friend Jacob spoke rather slightly of Clarence Piercy, comparing him to 'Meek Moses.' I infer you have not a high opinion of the man."

"We ain't."

"Well, I may be wrong, but I have figured it out that his record won't bear scrutiny. He hates me—wants to get rid of me. How could he better do it than by getting me into the meshes of the law, by means of a trap?"

"Well spoken."

"I want to know who wrote the letter to me, and if it should prove that Piercy had a hand in it, I would put him through."

"I'm free ter say I b'lieve he's jest as big a hypocrite as 'Meek Moses.' He can't be the same, though, fur Moses, ef alive, would be twenty-five years older than our grinnin' gorilla is."

"Certainly."

"Now, then, as long as you've volunteered your aid, we will let ye into our game an artom. You look like a brave man."

"Try me!"

"An' one willin' ter help the law."

"Try me!"

"We will, but the service may bring forth hot fightin'."

"Against criminals, of course."

"Yes."

"Then I'm with you, through thick and thin."

His hearty manner pleased Eliab, who proceeded to unfold as much of the case as was necessary. He frankly stated that stolen money was soon to arrive at Birdseye, and he thought it would be brought during the night. A train always passed through the town shortly after midnight, and it was probable that the custodians of the treasure would arrive by it. Merdell, alias Hickory Jim, was undoubtedly an advance agent, and the money, it was inferred, would be placed in charge of Piercy.

Plans were laid for the night, and then Eliab and Jacob took leave of their new ally. Going down the street, they met George Messenger, who carried a covered bird-cage under his arm. "Aha!" he said, saluting them, "you are just the persons I want to see. I am about to leave town, and, before I go, I want an answer to my proposal to this boy. Will he, or will he not, enter professional life under my wing, and whistle from Cape Cod to the Golden Horn?"

"Jacob kin answer," observed Eliab.

"I shall have to decline," Jacob returned.

"Think of the glory and—the money!" urged Messenger.

"I'm well satisfied as it is."

"I'll give you fifty dollars a week."

"Mister," put in Eliab again, "I'd like ter know what idee you hev in your noddle."

For answer, Messenger uncovered the bird-cage, and a rooster was revealed inside.

"See anything peculiar about him?" asked the rooster's owner.

"No."

"Don't, eh? How many legs does a rooster usually have?"

"By George! this one has four legs!"

"Well, rather! Perhaps you catch on now. I am the agent for Sparkle & Bonnehams' Great Mastodon Circus and Menagerie. At present, that unrivaled combination exists only on paper, but by another spring we shall be in the field to the great detriment of all other shows. Sparkle and Bonnehams have men all over the world looking for curiosities. Four-legged roosters, two-headed cows, one-eyed sheep; horses with wool, instead of hair; women who won't gossip, and men who won't lie, are especially desired. All freaks of nature and wonders of real life will be taken to our bosom. Now is the chance to enlist under our banner, and be a part of the unparalleled aggregation—the greatest show on this or any other globe!"

Mr. George Messenger talked like a race-horse.

His loquacity, so like that of Mr. Godown in moments devoted to business, pleased the detective, and he then and there did something in the way of business. He promised that Jacob should consider the offer, and, also, engaged Messenger's services for the night, without, however, revealing anything which could act against them.

Midnight!

The train from the south rolled into Birdseye and paused in front of the depot. This did not mean the scene of bustle and confusion which

stations in large places exhibit in such cases. Birdseye had never bustled in its life, least of all at the late hour mentioned.

On this particular night Clarence Piercey had made his appearance at the station a little before train-time, and a gleam of recognition came into his dull eyes when two men alighted from one of the cars.

Both shook hands with him, and then one returned to the train, and was borne away when the snorting engine settled down to business again.

He who was left was a very respectably-dressed man, but, sober and black as was his attire, he had the same poorly-concealed, rakish air appearance which had marked Merdell, *alias* Hickory Jim. The stranger carried a valise such as an honest traveler might carry, but there were eyes upon him which sent very inquisitive glances toward his baggage.

Piercey and his friend moved away. Leaving the station, they walked slowly down the street. Appearances indicated that they had it all to themselves, no one else being visible, so they gave no attention to their surroundings.

Perhaps they would have done better had they looked sharply; they might have seen the dark figures skulking along near them.

They went a hundred yards and then Piercey paused.

"I want a word with you, Kidder," he observed.

"Say on."

"Jim is over at my room, waiting for us."

"According to agreement. Well?"

"Kidder, you are on the 'make'?"

"Well, rather!"

"The chance is before you. The original fifty was decreased by corporation taxes, and so forth."

"What is to hinder you and me from raking in the whole pile?" inquired the model man of Birdseye. "We have only to skip and it is ours. I am tired of working for the corporation, and believe that I could make more money alone than when in with a gang."

"Drop it, for the Lord's sake, Pete!" exclaimed Kidder. "Your palaver may be of use to subdue idiots to your will, but it is too silly for me. Turn traitor to the gang? Never!" the speaker sharply added.

"But just think—"

"I refuse to think; and I shall report your proposed treachery to the corporation!"

"Dear friend, you would not do that—"

"But I would, and shall!"

"Then, darling, I will bid you good-night!"

Piercey spoke in his most sickly voice, but at the last words he suddenly snatched the valise from Kidder's hands and darted away down the street.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WORLD KNOWS HIM AS HE IS.

Piercey's bold robbery was a complete surprise to Kidder. He had not been holding the valise tightly, and it was easy to snatch it away; and he was so dumfounded that the robber had gained several yards' advantage before he recovered sufficiently to pursue.

He was aroused by the sight of several dark figures which flashed past him, and then he stirred into life and joined in the pursuit. Who the others were he did not know, but his anger burned so hotly against Piercey that he was reckless of consequences.

When a few rods had been passed, the runners settled down into relative positions like participants in a go-as-you-please race. Piercey led; then came a boy and a man almost side by side; then two more men; and, last of all, Kidder.

Had the street been occupied, instead of totally deserted by all save this party, the foremost pursuers might have been recognized as Jacob and Littleton for the first couple, and Eliab and Messenger for the second.

The turn of events had surprised no one more than Eliab, although, now that it had come, he was not astonished that Clarence should turn traitor even to his boon companions.

Piercey ran well and kept his wits about him. Silly as he was in manner—and his ways were natural—he usually had plenty of courage in emergencies.

He suddenly turned and darted into a passageway between some outhouses. The natural impulse of a pursuer would be to follow direct, as he had well calculated, but there was one person on his track who knew the position of the various buildings there, and suspected the trick at once.

"Come with me!" Jacob cried to Littleton; and, instead of entering the passage, he kept on down the street.

He soon reached a corner, and then, looking back, perceived that he was alone. His request had been unheard or unheeded. This did not stop Jacob. He hurried along a few yards further, on the cross street, and then reached a narrow gap between two of the outhouses. It was his theory that Piercey would seek to evade his pursuers, and if he could once get out of their sight, the obscure opening on the cross-street would furnish a fine avenue of retreat.

The result proved that Jacob had very accurately surmised the man's intention.

The former had barely reached the desired point when he heard the sound of footsteps, and, in a moment more, Piercey darted out.

Exultation was in the man's mind. He had doubled and dodged to good advantage, and had left his baffled pursuers behind.

But he had failed to count upon one thing.

As he darted out of the alley a light form dropped upon his shoulders; a muscular leg was twisted around his own; and he fell to the ground with Jacob on top of him. The fall was a shock both to his system and his hopes, but, looking up, he recognized his assailant, and a serpent-like hiss escaped his lips.

"Curse you!" he exclaimed; "if you don't let me alone, I'll strangle you!"

He made an effort to choke off the boy and rise, but found that he had run against an obstacle. Jacob held on, and foiled the man's efforts to rise. Piercey made a clutch for the detective's throat, but missed his hold, and a tremendous struggle began on the ground.

Back and forth they rolled, but luck was against Jacob. They rolled into the ditch, with him at the bottom, and the hollow frustrated his efforts to reverse their positions. Piercey dealt him a stinging blow on the wrist and succeeded in breaking away.

The robber sprang to his feet.

He knew he had but little spare time, and must get away before the other pursuers appeared. He was eager to again secure the valise and resume his flight. Knowing that his precious burden had been dropped near at hand, he turned to secure it. Then came a fresh surprise, and a striking pause.

The robber recoiled. The money-laden valise lay upon the ground, with Lightfoot Peter standing over it threateningly!

The bear knew his old enemy, and his gleaming eyes and exposed teeth showed that he would be delighted to renew hostilities, while Piercey was very reluctant to go near him. The pause, brief as it was, proved sufficient for the bear's young master to regain his feet.

"Good boy, Peter!" cried Whistling Jacob. "We'll defend the money-bag to the last!"

Voices sounded close at hand, and Piercey grew desperate. He made a dive for the valise.

A roar followed from the bear, and in a moment more the robber was wrapped in a fervent embrace and folded to a hairy breast.

"Help! help!" he wailed, piteously.

Help came. Eliab and Ralph dashed out of the passage, but stood amazed at what they saw. Jacob was laughing heartily, while Piercey squirmed in Peter's grasp like a bruised snake. The boy, however, did not forget business, and it was he who sprang forward and secured the precious valise.

Eliab caught on to the situation, and, hurrying to Peter's side, ordered him to release his victim. Somewhat strangely, the bear had never been in a more obedient mood; he relaxed his hold, and Piercey fell to the ground.

"Oh! I am killed!" he lamented. "Dear, kind gentlemen, please go for a doctor!"

Ralph lifted and shook him roughly.

"For a thorough-paced rascal, you are a contemptible specimen. You are not hurt; brace up and be a man—if you can!"

Really, Piercey had received no severe injury.

The other robber had disappeared. Possibly it had dawned upon him that he was in dangerous company, and while they were searching among the buildings, he had got out of sight. The valise, however, was recovered, and a tightly-tied package inside satisfied them as to its contents.

The next move was to visit Piercey's room. The presence of Lightfoot Peter on the scene had been a surprise, but he had won fresh glory, and no one wished to bar him out. He was allowed to follow while they went down the street, and, with Messenger, left outside as a guard.

All the others entered the house.

Piercey's room was invaded without ceremony. It was thick with tobacco-smoke, and Hickory Jim was nonchalantly puffing a cigar. His mood changed suddenly and radically when he saw the intruders, but the hostile air which

came over him was quickly subdued when Eliab drew a revolver and turned it upon him.

Jim was a wise man. He saw that he was irrevocably in the toils, and he determined, at once, to seek favor from the law by submitting with good grace, which he did accordingly. He was dismayed to see the valise in the hands of the detective, but exhibited so much resentment he learned of Piercey's treachery, that Eliab had an idea and sent the prisoner out of the room in charge of Jacob and Ralph.

"Now, then, Hickory Jim," pursued Mr. Gordon, "I know you an' your record, but you ain't the biggest knave out. Tell me all about Piercey who stumps me, an' I'll stan' by you when you're on trial."

"I'll do it," was the ready response. "The fellow is a knave and traitor, as well as a fool, and he shall pay for it. His real name is George J. Jasper, and he is one of the most dangerous men in the country. Born and bred in crime, he has followed it all his life. His dodge is to profess to be a minister, and it works to a charm."

"Kin you locate him more precise?"

"Not off-hand, but I'll give you facts, later. He has been in many places under different names, and has long been a member of a combination of sharpers. They work together, and as a check to treachery, each one has ten thousand dollars—the proceeds of robbery—in the hands of the directors of the band. That ten thousand draws interest as long he remains honest to the band, but he, of course, forfeits all if, as Piercey tried to do, he deserts."

"An interestin' gang!" commented Eliab.

"But now likely to be broken up, and all on account of Piercey. Malediction on the fellow! I'd like to see him served as his father was!"

"How was that?"

"He was lynched ten years ago. He was a good deal like Clarence, only not so silly. He was bland and dangerous. His *sobriquet* was 'Meek Moses!'"

"Eh?"

"You've heard of him, I reckon."

"Wal, I should smile!"

Eliab did not smile, despite his statement; he was too much bewildered. He had heard of "Meek Moses" before—he remembered him as the man who had killed Ralph Littleton's father on the island, over twenty years before.

Mr. Godown suspected, too, that he could at last see why Piercey had so early shown hatred for Ralph.

"He's a tough customer," Eliab declared, "but I reckon we have him under our thumb!"

The later scenes at Birdseye had been in the nature of an explosion. When the ruins were cleared away, the scene was found to be as follows:

Captured and brought to trial, Clarence Piercey was given a sentence to prison which, on an accumulation of charges, made up a term of twenty-five years.

Hickory Jim gave evidence which broke up the robber band, and escaped himself with a light sentence.

It was learned that Piercey had formed a scheme to swindle Jared Sherwin out of all his money, and would have sprung the trap as soon as prudent. When this was proved to Sherwin, he utterly collapsed, but established the fact that he had some common sense in his stubborn head—he withdrew all objections to the marriage of his daughter and Ralph.

The letter received by the latter, in the envelope which has so often been mentioned, was another of Piercey's traps. Knowing of the murder of Ethan Littleton, he had recognized in Ralph a man who might yet be dangerous, and had directed a New York confederate to start a scheme which would get Ralph into trouble.

George Messenger soon left Birdseye. There had never been cause for suspicion against him.

He was a decent kind of a man, and when he left town, it was to renew his efforts to get unnatural curiosities for the circus and menagerie.

Direxa and Ralph were married. They are happy, and both Jared Nicholas and Lucy Cyrena are very proud of young Littleton.

The money stolen from the bank, was all recovered.

Last of all we have to mention The Three Innocents. Eliab and Jacob took Lightfoot Peter quietly away. During Piercey's trial their peculiar methods were kept shady, and, when it was all over, they were free to go out in a new locality, in search of new game.

And wherever Eliab led his detective trio, and Whistling Jacob made music for the people, and Peter danced his awkward shuffle, these knaves and criminals had good cause to tremble.

THE END.

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